

# PEOPLE MOUNTAIN, PEOPLE SEA

by

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## ABSTRACT

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## Bone Meal

First, they pop into the corner shop for pastries: four almond croissants, four donuts drizzled in chocolate and crushed walnuts, four maple twists, two bear claws, six donut holes. Then—paper bags sprouting translucent spots of grease—they cross the street for the Mexican joint. Meredith asks for carnitas, and Shana orders her usual pollo asado. Yes, they want an order of chips—one each. The burritos, warm and smooth in silver foil, weigh heavily at the bottom of plastic bags effusively printed *Thank You Thank You Thank You*. Before heading into their apartment, the girls visit the convenience store downstairs, grabbing Hot Cheetos and Sno Balls and a carton of skim milk, which they're out of. Shana buys a pack of Camel blues and smokes one on the chipped red steps in front of their building, her pupils erased by light.

Inside, Meredith and Shana lay their harvest on the long table of unstained pine in the kitchen. The angled blinds allow white stripes of light to strike through the spread, to cross out their hands as they tear open bags and unsnap lids from cups of salsa.

“*Bon appétit*,” says Shana, sinking her teeth into a donut and tearing away its white flesh. A smear of chocolate adorns the corner of her lips. Her face has been chiseled down to the bone, all shocked eyes and a ridged nose. She wolfs down the rest of the donut and smirks. “What? Did you want me to say grace or something?”

“No, it’s not that.” Meredith takes a swig of water from her glass, sets it down. Takes another sip. Usually, this is when her body gives way to bliss and vibration, but today she feels out of sync with the whole procedure. She watches Shana graze the table in her resigned way, her lips smacking drily. Then, not to be outdone, Meredith pops a donut hole into her mouth and tongues the glazed surface, dissolving the sugar with a salivary grope. The back of her throat

feels raw; she wonders if a sustained chemical drip can slough away the skin and expose the soft muscle there. Her eyes feel sour from her few hours of fitful sleep.

Last night, they were taken to a Michelin-starred dinner in the financial district by Eric George, a 45-year-old executive at Ernst & Young. Shana met Eric four months ago through a matchmaking site for sugar daddies; it's the longest relationship she's had since moving to San Francisco. Meredith had been resistant to meeting him, but Shana had reassured her, "Yeah, he's going to, like, put his hand on your leg, but that's as far as it goes. We can leave whenever you say. We'll have a safe word. 'Kombucha' or something. And in return for your troubles you get a one-hundred-dollar Visa gift card. That's kind of his first date standard."

Having quit her job as a tutor and working on grad school applications, Meredith relies on errands she finds on TaskRabbit.com to pay the bills. When Shana brought up Eric's interest in meeting her—"I talk about you a lot, is all"—she tried to think about it as another task. It would be listed under personal assistance: *Endure a fancy dinner with a corporate skeeze; politely thwart his attempts to get you in bed with your best friend.* Compared to her recent undertakings (buying and delivering tampons to a ghoulish woman at an art gallery; assembling Ikea furniture for a couple fighting in Portuguese), this carried an illicit sheen. At least it would be something to laugh about when it was all over. Meredith agreed. She always did, eventually, with Shana.

With pink-flecked cheeks and shaggy bangs, Meredith looks like an overgrown grade schooler, someone eager for leadership, endowment. She dresses as she did in third grade with cable-knit turtlenecks and straight-legged jeans that end right above the ankle, showing off socks with a candy corn pattern. The studs in her ears are pink. When Shana moved in last year, recommended by a friend of a friend, she methodically displaced the existing décor with what

she called a “gypsy-chic” aesthetic, comprised of bleached coyote skulls and vintage lamps, and then she jiggled her hands into Meredith’s life as well. Whenever Meredith cancels her evening plans with a former coworker, she feels her roommate’s small, furry palm on her jawbone. She finds herself adopting Shana’s inexplicable prejudices against women who breastfeed in public, readers on public transit, dog walkers.

It was Shana who encouraged her to research programs in clinical psychology, to put in her two weeks’ notice. “Stay home,” said Shana, “and focus on what’s important.” Now Meredith’s days consist of running errands for strangers and doing sit-ups in the living room.

Eyes unfocused, Meredith feeds herself Cheetos with meditative calm, mincing each chip into a red pulp. These are all things Shana has taught her—to macerate your food; to drown it in water; to start with something colorful so that later, when it curdles in the toilet bowl, you’ll know that you are nearing empty. Shana is not a corruptive influence. Far from it—Shana is the longhaired wraith who reveals to Meredith the perfect bone that she must aspire to be.

As she bites into the radioactive pink of a Sno Ball, Meredith’s world mercifully shrinks. Sunless, skyless, outside weather evaporates. Birds enter drifts of fog and never reappear. Cities turn into flurries of black snow that bury people in sleep. All that exist now are her two pillaging hands and her insatiable mouth, and the dark pit of consciousness that has formed behind her eyes.

This food is an especial comfort after last night’s dinner. At first, Eric was as Shana described: shy, courteous, reluctant to talk about his life but eager to hear about hers. Thin and square-jawed, he clenched the muscles in his neck as he chewed, “hmm” and “ah”-ing as she narrated her life. Meredith told him about her upbringing on the family ranch in Wyoming, about the guesthouses plastered in dimming floral wallpaper and the shadow puppets she and her

brothers cast against it as children. She named her favorite horses and the cows, recalled the bone meal that fertilized the fields. The pungent earth would sprout femurs, smiling ribs, cackles of bovine teeth.

Meredith wore one of Shana's dresses. "He likes stuff with thin straps. Black. If you wear your hair up, he'll buy you anything." In accordance, her hair was in a bun with a slender braid framing her bangs. Shana had on a silk sheath that draped low on her back and revealed the many fins of her spine.

The girls were ravenous, having limited themselves to four hundred calories a day in the week leading up to this dinner. Like figures emerging from stone, each day their bodies accrued new angles. The waiter, a black vector in the spare white room, arrived too often with the next course. Each plate was both exquisite and cruel: sprays of celery held peanut butter and crisped anchovies; braised beef sweated under shaved pear, endive, watercress. It might as well have been a salt lick, a hunk of blubber. How sick were they, that they wanted to be in hoodies and cotton shorts, watching TLC with their shared bowl of peeled grapefruit?

Before dessert the girls excused themselves and purged in the restroom, then snorted coke from the flat of their apartment key. The coke was from Eric, who abstained. "I like for others to have it," he had said, sliding it into Meredith's lap. "It makes me feel relaxed in comparison."

Two fingers had traced the crease of her crossed legs.

"You like him, right?" said Shana, dabbing at her nostrils.

"Yeah, he's okay."

"Trust me. He's one of the good ones."

"What does that mean?"

Shana licked the key and stabbed Meredith's rib with it. "You know, like, an actual caring partner. Sometimes he reads me to sleep. *Tuesdays with Morrie*. That's some funny shit. Hey," she said, an appraising eye on Meredith's collarbones, "you look really good."

The button on Meredith's jeans digs into her stomach. She stares at a cross-section of her burrito, at the gnawed hem of the tortilla and the glazed meat and the soft chunks of avocado, and she swallows with pleasure and pain. Her breaths are short. A light blinks on in her brain, telling her that she's reaching the end. She gulps her water, feeling nauseous.

"I'm going to go first," says Shana, crumpling up the foil wrapper and tossing it onto the table. Paper bags and scrunched napkins litter the surface. She adjusts the wool sweater that goes down to her knees; the way it hangs on her, she might have no body at all. At five foot seven, she weighs 106 pounds, which is a pound heavier than Meredith. She knows this because after they taxied home, they stumbled into the bathroom to take turns weighing themselves, and peeing, and weighing themselves. They were flush and suggestible with liquor, leaning together over the scale. Despite their conjoined disorders, this was something they had never let the other see—the number.

She thinks she detects something smug in Meredith's silence. She pushes the chair back from the table but doesn't rise, instead letting her self-loathing pool at her feet, anchoring her in place. If her anger grows shrill enough, it can pop each cell of fat in her body.

"Eric really likes you," she says. It feels good to voice her jealousy, like rubbing a knuckle against a bruise. "He says he wants to see you again."

This extinguishes Meredith's already waning high. "I don't know if I'd be down for it."

"Why not? We had a good time."



After dinner, the girls accompanied Eric to a nearby bar. In the subterranean dark, high-shelved bottles of whiskey gleamed like candles on an altar. They sat on leather stools around a table tucked in the corner; the mounted head of a bison loomed above their heads. When Shana got up to order a second round, Eric watched the draped fabric at the small of her back, and then turned to Meredith and smiled.

“You’re an admirable woman,” he said. In the insufficient glow of the tea light between them, his lips hardly seemed to move. He seemed expressionless, like a ventriloquist’s dummy. “I’m sure you’ll end up attending an excellent school and conducting brilliant research in child psychology. I just love being around talent in its youth.” Then he leaned over the tabletop and kissed her. It was gentle, then grew muscular. Meredith didn’t mind the kiss so much as the feeling that she would not have been able to stop him if she had.

Shana returned moments later with her hands wrapped around three glasses.

“You don’t think they serve kombucha at this bar, do you?” said Meredith, locking eyes with her roommate.

Now at the breakfast table, Meredith turns her empty glass in her hand. She continues, “And you just looked at me like I was a total weirdo.”

Shana throws her head back in exasperation. “Oh, my god. I was so lit. And we never actually agreed on a word. Anyway, we came home right after that.”

““Right after that’ being two hours later.”

“Alright, alright. I’m sorry.” Shana snorts. “Kombucha.”

“Take this seriously.”

“I *am* taking this seriously,” says Shana, hardening her voice. “Fact is, neither of us can afford to say no to this.”

“You only want me to go because you’re afraid he’s going to break things off otherwise,” says Meredith. She realizes this as she says it.

“How much does each application cost you again?”

Meredith leans over the table, every twinge from her stomach like something snapping inside her. She turns over an open palm. “This isn’t the only way.”

Shana shakes her head. “You don’t get it. This is it for me. I don’t get to call up my parents if it gets too hard, and I sure as hell don’t have a ranch to go home to!”

“So how long are you going to keep this up?” Already Meredith can taste the bile rising in her throat. “What are you trying to do, *marry* one of these guys?”

Frowning, Shana tears the corner off a napkin and rubs it into a tiny ball. She starts to say something, but the syllable catches in her throat. The old darkness creeps up on her, grazing her back with its long and crooked nails.

“I love you, but I can’t do this for you,” Meredith says softly.

“You’ve made that clear, thanks,” says Shana, standing up. But she’s gotten to her feet too quickly, and spots of light tessellate her vision. The room fades at the edges. She gropes the edge of the table.

“Shana,” says Meredith, reaching for the girl’s hand. The light cutting through the blinds striates Shana’s body. In a moment she’ll be okay, but for now Meredith threads their fingers together, gripping Shana on this side of consciousness, grim with the assurance that in a little while everything they’ve ingested will have to come roaring back up.

## Delicate Arch

In the months following my college graduation, I spent more time with my mother than I had during my entire teenage life. I had moved into the spare bedroom of a gay couple's bungalow in Oakland, and she lived with her new husband in a gutted Victorian across the bay. "We're the getaway girls," she would say, calling with our weekend plans: mani-pedis at her favorite place in North Beach, tours of the brewery at Russian River, hiking the scruffy coast of Marin. Most of my friends were still circling the Oberlin campus, and the rest of us had scattered to our respective hometowns, so my life back in the Bay was a lonely one. I tried to disguise how much I enjoyed spending time with her as a matter of pride. I wouldn't let reconciliation come easy. I knew that this was all being charged to her husband Brian's credit card—maybe even precipitated by him. More importantly, it had taken her this long to realize that she had done it wrong. "It" being motherhood. "It" being the measures you take to prevent your daughter, age seventeen, from burning brown moons into her thigh with a Pall Mall.

As an official graduation present, she planned a road trip to Arches National Park in Utah. It was a place she'd seen in a travel magazine. Brian was supposed to come this time, but work called him overseas to visit the senior product manager in Berlin. So it was that my mother and I stood alone at the trailhead to Delicate Arch, a three mile hike out to the towering stone arch and back. Before we had even left the area map, some goof with a sunglass tan was hitting on her.

It made sense. My mother, at forty-one, was trim and petite, her hair smartly angled towards her jaw. Her heart-shaped face was delicately planed with a high, pinched nose, and the plumpness of her bottom lip accentuated her smile. In her cropped spandex pants and neon

orange racerback, she looked sporty and self-possessed, the type of woman who might rise every morning and think, IF IT DOESN'T CHALLENGE YOU, IT DOESN'T CHANGE YOU.

"If you can, try to get out there to the Fiery Furnace," the sunglass tan was saying, propping his foot on a rock. "It's tough going—a lot of twists and turns—but you look like you could manage just fine."

"Maybe we'll check it out," my mother said, looking to me and shrugging a shoulder. "See how we feel in the morning?"

He raised his eyebrows at me. "You keep an eye on your sister, okay? She gets into trouble; I can tell."

I was about to correct him, but she gave a squeal of conspiratorial laughter and threaded her arm through mine. Leaving him, we swayed together onto a dirt path that switchbacked up the sandstone formation. It felt good to touch her, but, feeling boorish beside her, I extracted my arm.

I looked like my mother if her face were bloated, if she were taller and thirty pounds heavier. As we climbed, I shed my plaid button-up, exposing a ribbed tank top that was already damp with sweat. The straps of my backpack were slick. Clambering after my mother in black high-tops that kicked up the dust, I thought I detected an affectation to her stride, an exaggerated pumping of her elbows as she sidestepped a group of descending teens. She was unrecognizable as the woman I had grown up with, as the woman I had once propped up on the couch with the dreamer's eyes and vomit in her hair. Since meeting Brian, my mother had stopped drinking—that was something I was grateful for.

The sun slipped from behind a cloud, and the land around us glowed, as if blood were rushing back into the orange sand and the distant fins of rock. The shadows under each shrub and

tree hardened; each pebble cast a dark twin. Rock cairns lined the way up a slope of smooth sandstone that met the horizon. Leaning into their climb, hikers morphed into backpack-shaped beetles as they reached the top.

“Slickrock, according to the guide book,” said my mother. “Can you believe we’re here?” She took a long step forward, light glinting off the Nike swoop on her shoe.

It was indeed the summer of my incredulity, of meeting my mother—my whole mother, not just the dregs I had known. My father had moved out of the apartment when I was twelve, marking the beginning of her Lost Years, years she’d spent pinballing from waitressing gigs to secretarial work to serving samples of protein bars at the wholesale store. By the time I got to high school, the routine included a nightly fistful of wine, a bottleneck she clenched with one hand as she stabbed inexpertly at stewed vegetables with the other. It wasn’t that she hadn’t asked about my friends or school, or what I had done with my father the weekend before—it was that the answers wouldn’t stick; they would slide off her face and onto the table and get in the way of her finding her knife. This blind and slippery woman marched before me now, conquering the mountain, as my breath grew ragged and my calves began to ache.

“How are you doing this?” I called to her.

She stopped walking, parting the stream of hikers like a river rock. She shaded her eyes with both hands and watched something behind me. Drawn by a humming noise, I turned to see a small drone take to the air; it was shaped like a white starfish with propellers on each of its four arms. A boy in a red shirt and his grandfather stood further downhill with their arms raised, following the aircraft in synchronized arcs. I could just make out the controller in the boy’s grip. “That’s bizarre,” I said when I caught up. My mother tugged the sports bottle free from my backpack’s mesh pocket and squirted water into her mouth, nodding in agreement. She pointed

the bottle at me next, but she mostly missed, and as I wiped the water away I tasted salt on the back of my hand.

“You set the pace,” she said, pinching the fat under my arm.

“*Don’t.*”

At this point we had been in each other’s sole company for three days, and I was remembering her small abuses. Throughout my adolescence, my mother had moaned that I was too heavy, too sullen, too weird; now that I had grown up, I was also too dispassionate about my work at an online magazine, where I published articles like *10 Reasons Why Mr. Rogers Was a Badass* and *8 Celebrities Who Look Like Crap Without Makeup*. “How do you expect to find a boyfriend if you hate your life?” she had asked me at a diner in Reno. I’d said that I didn’t want a boyfriend, and I didn’t hate my life, and she had leaned forward to squeeze my knees under the table and said, “Baby.”

I had told her the truth. My job didn’t enthrall me, but I liked working with sarcastic twentysomethings who took breaks to play Mario Kart in the lounge and who snuck beers at their desk, and it was all temporary—half my time in the office was spent answering Craigslist ads for nonprofit work. The city did get lonely at times. I caught myself romanticizing about a boy I had seen my sophomore year: Pierre, a classics major who played drums for a noise rock band and who had tried to chat up another girl on our first date (if you could call it that—we had met for dinner at the dining hall). I had convinced myself, however, that lonely was what I ought to be. My solitary errands were glamorous, symptoms of a generation. On Sunday mornings I walked to the local coffee shop for a double-shot Americano and drank it over my daily Proust, congratulating myself on my monastic patience with the universe and how unyielding it was to me, how distantly I was allowed to perceive its wild, gyrating lights.

At the highest point of the slickrock, we paused. I could see the parking lot a mile below us, the shrunken trailhead and the pale thread of the dirt path. Shedding the backpack, I let it thud at my feet and massaged my shoulders. My mother took a panorama with her iPhone, pivoting slowly to capture the striated mesas rising from the desert scrub.

“Brian would have loved this,” she said, saving the photo. “We’ll have to do this again with the whole family.”

I hadn’t spent much time with Brian, but I liked him well enough. Before I met him two years ago, I had expected a smug Silicon Valley type with wet-looking hair, but Brian was easygoing and bald, and he had a devious sense of humor.

“Me, you, Brian, and the baby.”

She was watching me with her lips clamped to suppress a grin.

“Wait, you’re pregnant?” I finally spat out.

“You know I can’t get pregnant,” she said, and I felt chastised. After having me, my mother had had two abortions, the second of which had bled long enough to require a hysterectomy. “No,” she said, recovering, “Brian and I are going to adopt a baby!”

White-throated swifts arrowed through the sky.

“It’s through an agency. We just got matched—he’s due in late November.” When I didn’t say anything, she added, “He’s half Korean!”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were trying to adopt?”

“Because,” she said, fiddling with the hem of her shirt, “sometimes these things drag on for years, and I didn’t want to jinx it.”

This was meant to placate me, but instead it intimidated a year's worth of furtive documents and consultations, of practicing her neo-maternal tactics on me. Her announcement exhausted me, or made me notice my exhaustion.

"You didn't want to *jinx* it, so you didn't tell me that I was going to have a *brother*?" My voice was doing pirouettes into registers I usually never reached. Dimly, I recognized my pleasure at being the petulant child. I could tell that the people who had stopped to take a breather were listening. They made half-turns to glance at us under the pretense of surveying the landscape.

"You're supposed to be happy. This is happy news."

"I am happy," I said, but my voice was rough.

"I didn't think you'd be against it."

"I'm not against it."

"Then what's your problem?"

I tried to muster words, but there wasn't anything I wanted to express beyond stamping the ground, beyond falling to the rock and beating it with my fists. Seconds passed with me cracking my knuckles as I both fantasized about and tried to disown this urge.

In the pause, the white drone we had seen earlier caught up with us. It buzzed just over our heads, the size of a Frisbee, and I saw that it had a silver camera attached to its underside.

"Sorry!" the boy in the red shirt panted as he scampered past. He looked to be about ten, with a large forehead and bulbous fish eyes. "The signal's weak," he explained, and screwed up his face as he thumbed the controller's two joysticks, maneuvering the helicopter higher.

As he moved on, the thing preceding him like a white omen, I sneered, "What a loser."

My mother's face grew stony. "You don't have to be so cruel."



“Who’s cruel?” I swung the backpack over my shoulders and barreled forward, leaving her behind.

In a way, she was right. I had grown up mean and envious of other kids whose parents got along, who were prioritized; I had grown capable of cruelty, surely.

When my parents and I lived together in our apartment, I had run around with a group of kids who had extended playtime hours like me, and we’d scream through the complex and throw rocks in the pool until Mrs. Isaacson from 26E came out in her sweatshirt and basketball shorts to break us up. The apartments were next to an empty lot that grew long grass and bulbs of garlic—sometimes I’d be sent over to pick these—and attracted feral cats. There were always cats napping on the landings or mewling at doors they knew would yield canned tuna. We named them: Miguel was Miguel’s favorite, a tuxedo cat with slitted gold eyes; Crooks was gray with a crooked tail; and Madeline was a skinny calico who’d never let you touch her.

One day, someone produced a pillowcase, and it became a game to try to bag one of the cats. The gang split into two factions of four and tried to herd a cat into the pale yellow sack, but we kept getting in each other’s way. Finally, after half an hour of stampeding around, I managed to catch one by its striped orange tail. It was Tigger. The boys howled and cheered as Tigger swiped the air, wriggling like a bass on the line.

“Drop him in the sack!” demanded Karl. I did.

Stuck in a knotted pillowcase, Tigger seemed truly evil, yowling and poking his claws through the fabric. A few of us had sticks in our hands and pummeled the sack, saying, “Bad cat! Bad cat!” We did this until Karl cried out and made a sudden stabbing motion—he did it with such force that the end of his stick went through the cloth, and blood seeped along the warp and

weft of it. The cat screeched, and so did I, loud and long enough that my mother opened the door to the courtyard and trotted towards us.

She took it all in in one glance: the boys armed with sticks, the bloodied and trembling sack, the snot bubbling at my nostrils. She swept down and unknotted the pillowcase, and Tigger tumbled out of it. He glared at me with his gory eye before streaking away. My mother gripped me by the shoulders. “How can you be so cruel?” she asked, her voice heavy and tight. Her fingers dug in as she jostled me back and forth. “What’s wrong with you? Huh?”

The kids began to scatter, and I wondered if they would let me play tomorrow. Then it occurred to me that if our home was anything like the Richardsons’ next door, which was where I went to watch television if my parents were gone, then I would be lying on the rug like their daughter Kathleen, reading aloud a picture book until it was time for dinner. I would not have blinded a cat, and I wouldn’t care about having any stupid boy’s approval. The injustice of it made me cry harder, and I ripped myself out of my mother’s grip, saying, “What’s wrong with *you*?” She was startled, and her hands still described my shape in the air. It felt good, so I said it again: “What’s wrong with *you*?”

I was older now, but I remembered the indignant child. I scaled the slickrock as if I could outpace her along with my mother, forge ahead as some cleaner version of myself. The trail fed into a sandstone saddle that was hemmed in by turrets of layered rock, and parched-looking junipers stooped by shallow basins where the earth was a wet brown. My heart fluttered from the effort of finding traction in the slanted terrain, and I wanted to slow down, but every time I glanced over my shoulder my mother was rounding the bend with her arms churning at her side. Bitterly, I pictured her, Brian, and the half-Korean baby posing in front of a Christmas tree in matching Fair Isle sweaters.

The road narrowed to a mountain ledge that overlooked crest after crest of sandstone formations, and then I was there.

Standing at the far end of a curving amphitheater of rock was the Delicate Arch, a 65-foot archway whose two sturdy legs framed the striated layers of salt domes behind it, with the wide blue sky above. Below, the sandstone spiraled downwards so that it seemed we were hiking the lip of a giant bowl. People picnicked on the inclines or stripped off their shirts to bake; a dozen others formed a line to take pictures, their puny arms gesturing at the monolithic structure. I stood with my hands behind my head and caught the breeze. Then I joined the line.

A couple of minutes later, I heard my mother exclaim, “Isn’t this just incredible?” She was, apparently, standing a few heads back. It felt ridiculous not to acknowledge her, but I swiveled back towards the arch, feeling her gaze bore into the back of my head.

Two girls in sundresses and cowboy boots scooted out of line to take pictures, pretending to hold up the arch.

“Okay, hold your hands a little higher,” directed the one with her bangs braided across her forehead. “A teeny bit higher. Now step back. Hold on—what *is* that thing?”

Sure enough, a white helicopter had risen upwards and was making wary circles in the air; the boy stood at the rim of the bowl with the controller, his face blanched by the sun. His grandfather stood behind him with his arms crossed over his stocky torso, saying something and nodding. Throughout the amphitheater, heads turned to observe the drone as it approached the Delicate Arch. Its progress was jerky, as if controlled by puppet strings from the clouds. It drifted higher, the propellers’ frenzied work barely distinguishable, and it seemed about to pass through the arch when the helicopter veered, clipped a snag of rock, and plummeted into the

basin. With each bounce, detritus skipped off the plane and scattered in the blackbrush. The crowd let out an impassioned groan, then laughed self-consciously at itself.

“Somebody should’ve talked that kid out of bringing his goddamned toy to a national park,” declared the man behind me.

The boy paced the edge of the bowl, taking stock of the damage. The grandfather palmed the back of the boy’s neck and spoke rapidly into his ear.

“Poor thing,” said my mother. “That would have been a cool video.”

“You saw how he was handling that thing,” I said. “He couldn’t have flown it through a hoop the size of Texas.”

My mother shot me a look. She bent over her sneakers and re-fastened the laces, emphatically cinching the knots. Then she left the line and strode to the edge of the basin, placing an exploratory foot there. Traveling the perimeter, she followed the curve and inched downwards. I heard the scrape of her shoes sliding on the rock dust and called out, “You’re not seriously going down there, are you?” She raised a hand, the muscles bunching around her racerback tank. As the going got steeper, she lowered herself to her haunches and groped forward with her feet.

“Ridiculous,” I muttered. Leaving the backpack in line, I followed.

When I neared, my mother stamped the rock with her heel. “There’re these secret footholds,” she said. “If you dig in you can pretty much support yourself as you go.”

I sought ledges in the sandstone and braced myself with the heels of my hands, and in this way, we descended until the rock leveled out enough for us to stand and scramble to the bottom.

Clapping sand and pebbles from my palms, I tilted my head back and saw the arch high above us, at this angle an obelisk wavering in the heat. A few people waved from the upper rim, at this distance as small as toy soldiers.

Down here, it was quiet. My mother and I swept the cracked surface, nudging aside gray branches with our feet. I found a white landing skid tangled in some waxy leaves, and then the camera, whose reflective eye distorted my face after I had wiped it clean with my shirt. My mother retrieved the body and turned it over in her hands.

“Huh,” she said. “It’s got a couple scratches, and one of the propellers is cracked...but it seems to be all right.”

“That’s pretty lucky.”

My mother raised her eyebrows. “What’s *lucky* is having a heroic woman, such as myself, on the scene.”

“Okay, Mom.”

She grinned. “Let’s get back up there.”

The way up was much more difficult. The soles of my worn-out Chucks skated backwards on the rock, and I couldn’t steady myself with one hand clutching the drone parts.

“Dig your fingers in, like this,” said my mother from behind me, her fingertips searching for grooves in the sandstone.

Suddenly, as I groped the surface, my leg slid out from under me. I cried out as my knee skidded on the sandstone. Pinpricks of blood dewed on the scraped skin.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I winced, leaning into incline, almost lying on it. My fingers tightened around the parts I was holding.

“Come on,” she said curtly, first patting my butt, then giving it a shove. “You just need to build up a little momentum.”

We started moving again. From time to time she placed a hand on my back for support, a gentle pressure that radiated from the spot she touched so that it felt as though I were being supported by a giant palm. I glanced back at her, at the white helicopter held in the crook of her arm. The way she cradled it reminded me of one night, years ago, when we had been forced off the highway for a detour and gotten lost in the murky avenues of a city somewhere between Santa Cruz and San Jose.

That night, fog obscured the street signs and cast halos around the lights that bathed the damp asphalt in red and green. My mother wrung the steering wheel and turned the radio down; I needed to pee but didn’t dare say so. Then, a produce truck turned onto our street and she breathed a sigh of relief, saying, “This guy’ll take us back to the freeway.”

Except that it didn’t—the truck hit a speed bump so hard that cauliflower leapt over the wooden slats, a white cascade of fifteen, twenty heads onto the street. My mother slowed as she approached the spill, popping her lips in thought. My father had already gone at this point. We weren’t exactly hungry but felt the shadow of it, careful with the groceries and never eating out if we could help it. When she drank, we had eggs and frozen waffles in front of the TV, which would have been a treat if not for her silence.

The car’s lights on the heads of cauliflower made them glow.

“Let’s get ‘em,” she decided, putting the hazards on. We dashed out onto the street and collected them in our arms as the taillights of the truck faded away. We dumped our winnings in the trunk. Later, I had peed in a deserted park, and we had had cauliflower for weeks.

“Curried cauliflower...” I said now, drawing out the syllables. We were near the lip of the basin and could hear the tourist babble. “Garlic roasted cauliflower...”

There was a pause, and then, “Oh my god,” and my mother began to laugh.

“Cauliflower casserole...”

“Cream of cauliflower soup!” she whooped, and we gained the edge.

The boy and his grandfather were there to receive us, grabbing hold of our wrists to tilt us back onto level rock. “Thank you so much,” the man was saying, patting me on the shoulder. The boy’s bug-eyed gaze swept over us and alighted on the pieces we held.

“You got them!” he said. He scrambled to arrange them on the ground. “They’re basically all here. The camera still works!”

“I’m glad,” said my mother.

“That helicopter cost two thousand dollars,” the grandfather told us, squatting to tap his finger against the camera. “It’s a particular hobby of his.”

“It’s good to have hobbies,” I said.

The people at the front of the line at the Delicate Arch waved us over. My mother handed her iPhone to the boy and said, “You owe us a picture, buddy.”

The arch itself rose from a narrow outcropping of rock. We ventured onto it, passing through the bowed shadow with mincing steps. We linked arms. Standing under the vault of stone, we had nothing at our backs but the heat of the sun and a breeze that seemed capable of bearing us up, suspending us over miles of writhing red rock, coaxing up our arms like unforeseen wings.

## People Mountain, People Sea

The Year of the Snake. The year good things will come to Ya Ya and her son. In the village, families decide which animals to slaughter. Soft clucking from farmers as they wrap hands around hens, the thud of the cleaver notching the tree stump. The stump ringed with blood for the dogs to lick.

Ya Ya squats by the door of the white hut and helps Little Hu into the arms of his quilted jacket. He sways while she tugs it into place. Grandmother packs tins of rice congee, pickled radish, and tea-soaked eggs for the trip into Changsha, where the boy's father will be, finally home for the New Year's celebrations.

"What do you think?" Ya Ya reaches under his cuffs to adjust his sweater. "Do you want *ba ba* to have a skinny hen when he gets home, or a big, fat pig?"

"*Da fei zhu!*" says Little Hu, and he blows air into his cheeks to demonstrate a rotund animal.

"That's right." She rises and buttons her own boxy wool jacket, then ties a gray scarf over the braided pigtails hanging past her shoulders. The excitement is in her fingers, pinching the fabric, closing the knot.

Grandmother hands her the linen pack, tins clanging, and says, "Be safe."

Glowing against the wood of every door, red squares of paper with the character for fortune, *fu*, in gold. Taped upside down: *Fu dao le*. Fortune has flipped. Fortune has arrived. Good omens glittering in the cold blue morning like autumn leaves turning and flashing in the wind.



Crickets call, call in the courtyard. Chickens skitter underfoot, losing dun feathers to the red dirt. The long grass rustles against Ya Ya's trousers as she approaches the main road. Little Hu's breath warm on her throat. Light returns the mountains to their humming greenness.

Ya Ya and her husband Hu Jinhai grew up in neighboring homes. Sent to milk the cows, they found each other every morning, their shy talk mingling in a sunlit fog. "I didn't fall in love with you," she told him later. "I remembered that we were in love in a past life."

The mountain wedding. The whole village attended. She wore a full red skirt with embroidered roses and a gold fringe that grazed her ankles as they danced to plucked lute strings, struck drumskin. Hu's face grew flushed from drinking *bai ju*. Hers too, alive and full of heat.

He had a plan, he said as he released the pearl buttons at her back. He would find work by the sea, and when he was ready he would send for her. In Shanghai, she would live like a princess. Spend her afternoons at the movies, her nights at fine restaurants having sweet tapioca soup for dessert.

Silk blouse peeled back to reveal brown shoulders. She couldn't make herself believe it.

Hu departed in the bed of a truck full of cabbages and other men. He clung to the raised wooden slats, body swinging like a puppet's. Loneliness sifted into her. Dust settling on the abandoned road.

He spoke country words. He was dark skin, dark intention. He pulled rickshaws and sold chestnuts in paper bags. Pushed counterfeit bags. *L-V, Gucci. Follow me*. Four times the *cheng guan* came, white gloves on the wind, drawing blood from the vendors. He slept on cardboard

mats dissolved by rain and gutter water. He ate congee. He went hungry. Followed purses under bridges and let them trot away. He made a friend, a man with skin puckered by fire, who worked at a restaurant on the Bund. He waited tables. He had views of the Huangpu River and cargo boats passing on the yellow water, foreign bankers with yellow hair.

He called home. Ya Ya gave birth to Little Hu on a bamboo mat with Grandmother gripping her hand and Sister urging at her feet.

Soon, he said. Here, the way is lit with neon. Illumined city of glass and steel. Streets and parks and shops alive with people. *Ren shan ren hai*. People mountain, people sea.

At the train station, Ya Ya waits on a plastic bench. She peels eggs for Little Hu, the fleshy whites marbled from soaking in black tea. He chews silently in reverence for the throngs around him, a spectacle he absorbs with quick, glittering eyes. Singing under her breath, Ya Ya lulls him to sleep in her lap. All sensation drains from her legs.

Returning migrant workers swarm the station at intervals. They tumble out of train cars with burlap bags and old suitcases swinging, the brims of their cloth caps misshapen from nervous folding. Men and women yip and form staggering, four-legged creatures on the platform.

Hu Jinhai's train comes and goes. She stands on the bench and surveys the platform before a policeman barks. Hands going cold. The world paling. She buys a bag of White Rabbit candy from the snack cart and shares them with Little Hu, who sucks on the sweet nougat and asks where *ba ba* is.

"He's coming," she says. "He'll be here soon."

Inhabited by a white fear. She prays the next train will bring him, then the next. In a future life she will gladly be a stone, if in this one she can be his wife.

“That’s enough,” says Ya Ya when Little Hu reaches for another candy, and the child begins to screech.

Grandmother picks up when she calls. “*Hui lai ba*. Hu Jinhai couldn’t get a train.”

It was going to happen; it has happened. Migrants overwhelming the rails in Shanghai, havoc on the platform. Ya Ya grips the pay phone and watches her son press his cheek against the booth’s plastic walls. She catches him by the jacket collar. She hangs up but doesn’t let him go.

Late night. Ya Ya wipes the dust from their faces and puts Little Hu to bed, pitted by another year alone. How long before time is inconsolable, before his father is a stranger?

She is out by the pen where the pigs lie. Nostrils filling with dark, fecal musk. Moonlight reveals their bristly backs and the brown markings on their skin. Four of them twitch on the ground. Silkworms huffing and grunting in sleep. Ya Ya toes the mud in her blue cloth shoes, the earth soft and pungent below her. O, merciful god that protects this swine. Protect me, too. She places her hand on the warm animal and shuts her eyes.

## The Spa

I learn about Dustin's death through Facebook. I am at work, taking a lunch of grilled chicken and broccolini at my desk, a diet prescribed by my pregnant Trisha, who now insists that I eat for posterity. The message was posted five hours ago. Five hours ago: I had my morning mug in a hoodie and boxers, making grabs at Trisha as she collected her pointed-toe pumps. *Words cannot express how deeply I feel this loss.* I don't remember who this person is, this unspeakably sad person. He must have worked at the water park one summer, erased from my memory after I left Sparks, Nevada, buried by the algorithm except for this dark speech bubble.

I write a comment that I edit and eventually delete. Messaging the poster—he sold funnel cakes, it comes back to me now—I find out that it was an aneurysm. The funeral is tomorrow. It's an eight-hour drive from Santa Barbara, so I leave straight from work that evening.

"You're going to *whose* funeral?" says Trisha, her voice grainy through the Bluetooth.

Her reaction cuts through gauzy layers of shock and denial. Threads of pain radiate from my chest as I realize how much distance I've put between myself and my life in Sparks.

"Dustin Reynolds. My old boss at the water park. I've told you about him."

"You told me you and his daughter used to bone in the water slides, that's for sure."

"He really took me in, Trish."

"Sorry. I'm feeling on edge for some reason. You okay?"

"I'm okay. I'll be okay."

She pauses. "Well, be safe. I don't like you on the road so late."

Recent rains have lacquered the asphalt. After an hour, I turn down the music until it is barely audible, just stray notes and an incoherent thumping. Dustin staggers in my mind as in the spinning frames of a zoetrope, his movements convulsive, out of order, until I find my most

recent memory of him: he's singing Bing Crosby into the mouth of his beer bottle, leaning into his wife's ear at the dinner table. Lindsay and I are holding hands. She squeezes my knuckles as she laughs and hops to the back of her seat. I'm home from Dartmouth for Christmas. In a week or so, she'll know everything—the usual transgressions, girls and vanity; I think I said *be my own man*—and that will be the last I see of her or Dustin. I was mean; I was cowardly. I was nineteen and doing most everything wrong.

The needle ticks towards 90 miles per hour. I switch to an inside lane.

After leaving Sparks for college, I had little reason to go back. My parents reconciled after a decade's war and moved to northern California, escaping the mean airs of our house, the skylights always clogged with leaves and grime. It had stopped feeling like home long before they sold it, anyway.

My mom was an investment banker and still lived in Shanghai, where I had grown up. I'd left with my dad when I was six because he was convinced that in America, he'd find his calling: "The air is better," he used to say, as if it were smog keeping him from work. Once distant, my mother made increasingly frequent visits to the house when I was a teenager. She was like a bad spirit clapping the cabinet doors and trembling the tines of forks in the drawers. I must have known about her stays beforehand, but in my memory she materializes on a closet hanger, her shoulders hooked high by her ears. Suddenly she is sniffing over my schoolwork and auditing our lives, what we've done with her money. Despite his efforts, my dad never worked for more than two months at a time. His back was bad for physical work, and he was too ill-tempered for anything else.

After we started going steady, I stayed at Lindsay's house to escape my own. Her mom was a nurse whose hours barred her from chaperoning, and when Dustin got home we caught an airing of *Jeopardy!* together. Dustin the father and Dustin the General Manager of Wild Island were the same—a riotous six-foot-four with wild blond hair, always surprising with how much he'd figured out about you in five minutes. You didn't feel vulnerable; you felt confirmed. He was a ham about practicing the saxophone, throwing his body back and forth as he went down the hall. Occasionally he told me to go home, just like that—"Go home, Ryan." Sometimes I would, and sometimes I drove to the 24-hour Korean spa at the edge of town, where twenty bucks got you a night of hassle-free sleep.

Ironically, it was my mom who'd alerted me to Seoul Spa. She had gone expecting sleek, luminous pools and plush arrangements of lounge chairs, and she'd come home waving her hand under her nose, exclaiming, "*Luan qi bao zao!*" and promising never to go back.

Seoul Spa is an unlikely sanctuary, but it's where I head from the off-ramp. Passing strip mall after strip mall, I note the permutations of fast food chains and pharmacies and wonder if the spa has closed, too.

There are four other cars in the lot when I arrive. Seoul Spa is on the second story of a disintegrating mall. Now, the vast and quiet space feels like a consumerist ruin. Someone has placed traffic cones and caution tape around areas of crushed tile; neon banners overlap each other on the dark storefronts, prophesying, *Everything Must Go!* Lights left on in leasing spaces illuminate empty display cases and postured mannequins. Uncertain of what I'll find, I walk up the broken escalator.

My wires cross. As I approach the crest of the steps, I hear the muscular rush of water at the top of the Black Widow, the most popular slide at Wild Island. I'm sixteen again, skinny with snakebite piercings, watching the flexed thigh of the girl at the head of the line, the pale tanlines harnessing her shoulders. I blow the whistle, and she lowers herself into the mouth of the black tunnel and disappears.

This is where I meet her. At the end of my shift, she climbs into the tower and brushes past the line. Her Hawaiian shirt is knotted at the waist, and the name embroidered above the pocket says Lindsay. I recognize her knobby chin, her dark, straight eyebrows.

"Hey, you're Dustin's daughter," I said. "I'm Ryan." I add, "It's my second summer here." It was a point of pride around Sparks to get a job at Wild Island. People debuted their summer flings here, or got high and spent whole days tubing the Bahama Mama River, or tested their fake IDs at Kokomo's Island.

"I can't believe you're electing to waste your time in this shithole," she said.

"Easy," I said. "And you're not?"

"No, it's 'cause of my dad. It's a lesson in fiscal responsibility."

I blew the whistle. Below us, bodies rustled the aquamarine water and dribbled on the hot concrete, beach towels draped over shoulders. My mother was in town, and my parents had been fighting that morning; one was always wanting a divorce when the other didn't. I'd gotten to the office fifteen minutes late as a result, and Dustin had motioned me to his desk.

He pointed at his computer monitor and sucked his teeth. "What does that say?"

The screen showed a bald eagle with its wings fanned. I read the white typeface beneath it. "Dare to soar?"

“That’s right.” Dustin nodded, deadpan. “I don’t need you to be late, son. I need you to soar.”

“Okay. Yeah, I can soar.”

He leaned back in his chair and said, “And, uh, it’s Lindsay’s first day. When you see her, talk to her, would you? Welcome her. She’ll bark, but she won’t bite. She’s trying out this new surly teenager thing, but I think you can crack her.”

Dustin’s confidence in me was a welcome change from my parent’s severe disappointment. They insisted that my pre-SAT scores signaled future ruin, that Wild Island kept me from more fruitful extracurriculars like the Model UN or the debate team. The more they lectured, the more it was a relief to hear the poolside speakers blaring electro-pop and shouted choruses when I arrived, to sneak a turn on the slides after a long shift, quick air shucking heat from my chest before the cool plunge.

Up in the tower with Lindsay, I shrugged. “It’s cool here. Stick around, you’ll have fun.”

She scoffed, but the way she fiddled with the whistle around her neck told me she wouldn’t be too hard to crack.

Miraculously, the spa has stayed in business. A teenager thumbs through her phone at the front desk, hidden behind a thicket of curled bamboo plants and orchids. She glances up and begins speaking in a high, demure Korean, and I shake my head to say, *no understanding*.

“Is this your first time at Seoul Spa?” she tries again.

“I used to live here,” I say, but cannot muster the pep to make it a joke.



She takes my credit card and points at the small lockers behind me. “Shoes in there.” She holds out a folded uniform of dull blue cotton. “Locker room in back. You know your way around.”

At 2 a.m., the locker room is empty. I shake off my work shirt and slacks and glance in the mirror as I hang them up. The puff of stomach, white gulls outlined on my calf in faded ink. To pass the time at Wild Island, Lindsay and I would buy sheets of island-themed temporary tattoos from the gift shop and apply cartoon surfboards to biceps, umbrella drinks to shoulders. I surprised her with the gulls before I left Sparks. It was the requisite adolescent mistake, I guess: to promise immutability, to know yourself forever.

From the locker room, one door leads to the wet sauna, hot tubs, and showers. I head instead into the main co-ed area, barefoot on the bamboo floor. Here, low tables and pillows are set up for quiet card games. A flat-screen TV broadcasts a Korean soap opera to a handful of other spa guests, its saccharine theme song playing over the spittle of a broken indoor fountain.

I lie down in the Himalayan salt room. Bricks of pink salt line the walls, and thin mats cover a bedding of pink salt gravel. The insistent heat cradles my body, glossing it in a shining film as I turn my palms to the ceiling, surrendering. I’m conscious of the shape of my breath as it leaves my open mouth. The stainless steel heater emits a few loud knocks.

The spa provides a sleeping room, a dark cell with matted pillows, but I’ve taken short naps in the dry saunas. Waking is like birth, full of heat and moisture and uncertain breathing. I imagine Trisha on the mat beside me with a blue gown gathered behind her raised knees and the cords of her neck straining red. It’s impossible to relax. My mind is now pricked by the distant alarm of my daughter’s birth, now the present ringing of Dustin’s death. The space between my toes grows slippery.

Just before my senior year, Lindsay and I had a brief pregnancy scare. She was late, she told me, stacking blue mats at the bottom of Zulu Racer. Her eyebrows slumped together over her red plastic sunglasses. “I’m not too worried, but just so you know.” Though it was too early for accurate results, she took a series of pregnancy tests that I shuttled from the local gas station to the Wild Island employee bathroom. After she had flushed, she let me in, and I would stand behind her with my chin on her shoulder, watching the white rod that still carried dew from her pee. She must have felt my heart thumping on her back.

Her period started a week later, and it was only then that my initial surge of panic resolved into a happy foam. Only then did I picture what it might look like in the future, when we were a family, and Dustin my dad.

The soap opera switches to a K-pop variety show in the dead of night. A man snores in the adjacent darkness. With my arm for a pillow, I rest on a mat at the back of the room and watch the program through half-lidded and stinging eyes. The acts alternate between girl groups and boy groups, all impeccably choreographed and costumed. Sometimes there is a soloist. The stage spasms with colored lights and lasers, and the camera lurches towards coquettish fox-girls wearing furry ears and hot shorts, break-dancers throwing back leather jackets to pose. The audience members are always stoic, their faces dimly visible.

Some hours into the program, I admit to myself the unlikeliness of arriving at Mountain View Cemetery. On the fringe of sleep, my view of perfectly synchronized hips is obscured by rising tombstones. It is absurd, after all this time, to think my presence can offer comfort or return to mourn, if mourning is a kind of claiming. A hooded figure climbs onstage, parting the

heavy wool to reveal a pale and twitching thigh. Maggots wave their blind heads under skin like translucent wings.

I wake up late and full of misgiving. Others have filled the spa, emerging from rooms flushed and textured with sweat, enlivening the space with conversation. In the locker room, I splash water on my face to clear last night's fitful imagery. I can still go to the reception. On my way out, I see that people have set the gym equipment in motion.

The light outside is a weak broth. "Okay," I say as I ease the car towards Dustin's house. "Here we go." My cowardice turns all the lights to yellow.

The way is familiar. Cars clog the driveway and line the curb. I park on the other side of the street and watch the windows for activity. The house has recently received a coat of paint, an inoffensive cream, and the tall maples have disappeared from the front yard. As I sit in the car, a couple approaches the front steps with a casserole dish covered in aluminum foil.

Lindsay answers the door. From here, I can see that her blonde hair is straightened. She wears a gray cowl neck dress and black tights. She disappears into the arms of the woman, the crown of her head bobbing as she nods, then steps back to let them in. A moment later, she appears on the doorstep with a cigarette between her lips, and as she walks to the edge of the lawn she flicks a lighter until it catches. Her ankles cross as she takes her first drag. Fingers gone cold, I exit the car and shut the door gently behind me.

The sound turns her in my direction. Her face betrays nothing as I cross to her, and for a moment the old cliché sweeps over us: it's as if no time has passed at all. I have been here all along, have simply stepped outside to make a phone call. She still has the narrow, feline eyes and full brows I grew obsessed with, the strong chin and straight mouth. Then we are within arm's

reach, and the delusion evaporates. Ten years accordion between us, sliding her in and out of focus until I'm not sure whom I'm addressing.

"Hi, Lindsay."

She exhales forcefully over her shoulder and peers at me. "Ryan Shieu. You're literally the last person I expected to see here."

A nervous laugh escapes me. "Here I am."

"Here you are," she echoes softly.

"I heard about your dad—I'm so sorry. I couldn't believe it. I didn't really—I didn't have a plan coming out here, but when I heard I just thought that I should, you know, be here. It felt wrong not to."

A muscle at the corner of her mouth twitches. I notice how time has corseted the flesh closer to the bone.

"I know you must be going through hell."

Lifting her eyebrows, Lindsay scratches the crease of an eyelid with her pinky finger. Distantly, I register that she's not wearing a ring. "I'm exhausted. Beyond the funeral and everything, grief itself is kicking my ass."

"I can't imagine. How's your mom holding up?"

She glances at the house before answering. "It's really hard. She's being brave, but it breaks my heart to think of her staying here, alone, after I go back. I live in Denver now."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah." She flashes a tight smile.

"What's it like in there?" I nod at the house.

"It's good. It's good to have people around."

“Yeah, that’s what I figured.” Suddenly aware of my hands, I slide them into my pockets. In the pause, strangeness dilates between us. The wind takes her hair in the other direction. “You know, if it’d be better for me to leave, I can leave.”

She blinks through the tip smoke and nods. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Okay.”

“It’s not so much that I don’t want you here, it’s just that I don’t know what to *do* with you here.”

“No, I get it. You should be with your family.” I’m speaking too forcefully. Her eyes shift onto mine, and I know we’re both remembering the jackets I kept in her closet and the socks that rolled under her bed, the micro-suede recliner that Dustin and I raced for, the shelves I helped him install in the garage one morning while Lindsay and her mom were out shopping.

“I know you came a long way. It means a lot,” she says, leaning in. We hug with just our shoulders, but it’s enough to remind me how our bodies used to fit. “Where are you staying?”

“Seoul Spa.”

She makes a sound of recognition. “Of course.”

I am in the ice room, fingertips pressed to the frost on the walls. The cold is sobering. I have no right to be disappointed. In Lindsay’s life, I am a gray and slender shade. I remember the misshapen confession I gave her, all the iterations that tried to cast cheating as a kind of self-discovery. I shut the door on her, and on Dustin, who had talked me through my college essays and shaken my hand when I brought him the letter from Dartmouth. My breath comes in clouds. I force myself to stay. I will my guilt to freeze, to form a dark and crackling lake. Dustin’s death is not about me.

Someone lies down beside me in the jewel room, and I turn to see that it's Lindsay. In the murk, her eyes reflect tiny constellations of light from the quartz crystals glinting in the walls. The ribbed collar of her uniform is coming loose from going through the wash too many times.

"What are you doing here?" I ask hoarsely.

She shrugs, hands folded across her stomach. "Something tells me that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." She faces the ceiling, then rolls her head back to me. "I also needed a break from the house. The mood is bleak." She pronounces the hard *K*.

"I'm sorry for intruding."

"You didn't. I meant it when I said I'm glad you came. My dad loved you."

I raise an arm in the air, and sweat pools in the divot of my elbow. The red numbers in the digital display above the door say it's 136 degrees.

Lindsay says, "You know, you can't just show up and expect things to be normal. I've put it all behind me, but there's a reason we're not friends. You said goodbye, and it was like we never happened."

"I was an asshole."

"You were the asshole incarnate."

I sit up, catch hold of my slippery calves. "I know that. And I'm sorry. I regret it, all of it. I just didn't want to give you some cheap, easy apology that would dismiss how I treated you."

"That's right, lay it on thick."

"I feel awful, is what I'm trying to say."

She props herself up on her elbows. "It feels like another life."

We fall into silence. I swipe a towel along my forehead and the back of my neck. After a while, I ask, “How did you end up in Denver?”

She lifts her chin and inhales deeply through her nostrils, as if breaching the surface for air. “I followed a guy, actually. He ended up being a huge disappointment, but I stayed to be a speech therapist at a children’s clinic.”

“Hey, that’s great.”

“It’s fulfilling. And I’ve met someone who’s making me reconsider the whole egg-freezing thing.”

I half-shake my head. “You don’t need to do that.”

“I’m partly joking when I talk about it.” She scoots into an upright position and hugs her knees. “What about you? I don’t know anything about you. It’s like a bizarre first date.”

“Yeah,” I grunt in agreement. “Let’s see. Where do I start?” I tell her about my job at the consulting firm and the raise I’m angling to get, about Trisha’s work at the interior design agency and her write-up in *Better Homes and Gardens*. We bought a condo last year, which has introduced an era of vintage dealers and flea markets into our lives, Trisha currently determined to find the perfect farmhouse sideboard. It sets me adrift to describe my life in such broad strokes to the girl I used to text about things overheard at Burger King.

“Sounds like things are pretty good right now,” says Lindsay, pulling the sleeves of her T-shirt over her shoulders. “I’m happy for you. Honestly.”

“Thanks. Well, actually, there’s more—we’re expecting a baby in March.”

“Ryan,” she exclaims, her eyes wide, “that’s wonderful!”

I grin. “I know. It’s a girl.”

“A little girl,” she repeats, but her voice betrays her, the words warped and heavy, like her batteries are dying. I see the fight in her face, and then she gives in, squeezing her eyes into the heels of her palms as she releases the first sobs. Hesitantly, I reach out to rub her back. Through her shirt I can feel the knuckles of her spine. “I’m sorry—” she stutters, sucking in air. “I just—I miss him so bad—”

I shush her, wrap an arm across her shoulders. “I know,” I say, though I don’t know, cannot know, the separate plane she is limping across. We huddle like this for a long time, dampening each other with sweat and tears, until her fluent grief subsides into deep sighs. Her head hiccups against my shoulder, the hair matted and wild. She is like a cooing child in my arms. The earlier awkwardness is gone: it is like we have been reincarnated, remade to be good for each other. Without thinking, I bend to kiss her forehead.

The plaque outside maintains that the stones embedded in the jewel room’s walls release a sacred healing energy. Where they haven’t come unglued and shattered, rounds of purple rock gleam on the walls, dark as blood.

Lindsay says haggardly, “I need a cigarette.”

A sliding door made of latticed wood and paper reveals the smoking room, which is cramped and harshly lit. The air is stale. Video slot machines line one wall, projecting visions of aligning cherries. Lindsay and I sit across from each other at one of the two tables. Between us, crumpled cigarette butts crowd the jaw of an ashtray. She scoots her pack of Camels towards me, but I decline with a little shake of the head. She exhales through her nostrils, eyes downcast, and shrouds her face in smoke.

“This has been cleansing,” she says.



“It has.”

“I’m going to shower and head home.”

“You should. Your mom might be missing you.”

Lindsay leans back, eyeing me down the length of her nose. “Ryan, do you recall asking me to marry you?”

I glance at the ceiling. “Um, no. Are you sure it was me?”

“No, I’m always mixing up marriage proposals.” She traces the tabletop with her cigarette hand, twirling a ribbon of smoke. “We were at Wild Island. It was closed, but we’d broken in for someone’s birthday. Everyone was getting sloshed at the bar, and you and I were eating a jar of big green olives. Then you bit one on both ends and held it out and asked me to marry you.”

“I wish I remembered this. What’d you say?”

“I said it’d require a bigger ring.” She scrunches her nose. “But I thought it was sweet.”

I hunch over the table and run my palms over my face.

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking I had so many chances to get in touch. I would have been back in your dad’s life, too.”

She puts out the cigarette. “He forgave you.”

“It’s not just that. I could have been someone different to him.”

Lindsay hesitates, then reaches across the table and draws my hands to her. “He would’ve liked that,” she says, and gives them a squeeze. “But I’m glad you’re here now.” I look down at her small hands wrapped around my fingertips. I think about our last Christmas together, our

hands locked while Dustin swayed at the dinner table, lowering his chin in an exaggerated baritone, and I take some comfort in the knowledge that this time, it is not the end of things.

## Wendy Beside Herself

Three years after Wendy Tsai loses her right arm to a southbound Mustang on the Pacific Coast Highway, she hears two reports ring out through her townhouse in Costa Mesa, and upon answering the door, she discovers that the arm has returned. It is free of glass, the bone unfractured—it looks better than ever, in fact: bronzed, oiled, coconut-y from an island vacation. Where it ends above the elbow, flesh has been cauterized into violet blisters.

—Surprise, sweetie, says the arm, fingers moving in an arpeggio across the welcome mat. I came to wish you a happy birthday.

—Thank you, says Wendy. Happy birthday to you, too. She tugs on the hem of her extra large UC Santa Cruz shirt, oddly ashamed to be caught with a flaking banana slug across her chest. Her undergraduate self bought it as sleepwear, but now it's one of the few shirts that still fit. She pivots to let the arm through and says, I'm baking a *tres leches* cake.

—Need a hand? The arm skitters into the house, nails clicking on the pale floorboards. The sound reminds Wendy of the ancient, weak-hearted Pekinese she rescued with her husband Daniel. He never woke after the accident; the dog was put down shortly after; and some days, Wendy prefers not to get up, either.

Tufts of flour and baking powder dust the dark Formica countertops in the kitchen. The arm sends tiny avalanches of powder onto the checkered linoleum floor as it parades around. Wendy falters, detecting a density and brininess in the air. She remembers the wind blustering through the open window on their way to the Rusty Pelican that night, how it unpinned strands of hair and fanned them over her eyes like the languid tresses of a sea anemone. She remembers switching off the radio, resting her hand on his thigh, the dark tide reflecting nothing.

—Sister, it feels good to be home, the arm says.

—Let me just finish up here, says Wendy. She lowers the hand mixer into a froth of butter, sugar, and eggs. Saved from conversation by its mechanic whirr, Wendy appraises the arm, which is squeezing droplets of vanilla extract into the bowl. She admires its bright, muscular presence. A strange envy overtakes her—she wishes *she* were amputated, preserved at thirty-one, the type of woman who begs for the coastline en route to dinner, the fact of her husband intact behind the wheel. She says in a measured tone, You look like you’ve gotten some sun.

—It’s all thanks to Bali, baby. This time last week, I was riding an elephant through a tropical canopy with a hunky islander named Budi at the reins. But that’s nothing, the arm adds, wielding the spatula as Wendy shakes in the dry ingredients. Try soaking in a Nordic hot spring, snowflakes falling on the water—you’ll start shedding the years faster than you can put ‘em on. I’m telling you: feels good to be unattached.

The arm taps the ring on Wendy’s finger. It says, Speaking of which. Hasn’t this gotten a bit small for you?

Wendy glances at the thin gold band, the austere stone that they chose together. Pain gathers in the stump of her right arm like someone gaining consciousness from a kind dream. She reaches to massage the purple suture. She says, grimacing, Would you grease a pan for me, please?

—Whatever you say, sighs the arm, clanging a metal pan on the burner rings. It runs a pat of butter across the pan in quick sweeps, seeming contemplative.

Wendy maneuvers the mixing bowl against the counter with her hip and stirs the batter. The past few years have taught her self-sufficiency, but they’ve also taught her how to stay

home. Contorting to zip and unzip herself, guiding the wheel by one hand—she prefers her private pains to these. She feels the arm watching her with its eyeless gaze.

Then it bursts out, I can't believe you're *baking*. That was always Daniel's thing, wasn't it? Remember the lemon bars he used to make? Wowza! Well, maybe you do, it adds, gesturing to the group fitness schedule on the refrigerator door. It's posted with the words *patience* and *horses* from a magnetic poetry set.

Wendy has long since stopped going to her weekly spin class. If only the room wasn't outfitted with so many mirrors, reflecting from every angle her thick calves swinging over the pedals, heat rising like a rash across her face. She's embarrassed to see her body labor over imagined hills, to see surprise register on her classmates' faces, and then their stony determination not to look again.

She pours ribbons of batter into the pan, saying, I like to feel close to him.

—It's gotten a bit self-indulgent, don't you think?

—That's enough! Wendy winces, massages the stump.

—You're not helping yourself, says the arm hotly, lifting the pan and wiggling it to even out the surface of the soupy cake. It points at Wendy with a buttered finger: And as far as I can see, you're going to die in this kitchen.

Wendy heaves the oven door open, its hot breath and her frustration coaxing sweat from her pores. She doesn't expect the arm to understand. It may have gone cliff diving in Acapulco, toured the swamps of Louisiana, but it hasn't experienced the house without Daniel, brittle as any wind-shorn tundra under her bare feet. She's about to express this, but as she turns, the arm hops off the counter and saunters out of the room.

—Where are you going? demands Wendy.

—Forget it, says the arm. It's bad vibes in here. It taps its fingers against the wall in farewell before disappearing around the corner.

A thrill of anger sends Wendy after it, heels thumping on the floorboards. I *need* you here, she hisses, though it wasn't true a moment ago. You don't know what it's *been* like. She snatches the arm by its wrist. Surprised by the heft and dimension of her severed flesh, she hoists it in the air, tightening her fingers around its wriggling cords of muscle. The arm strains and gropes at air. Let me go, it squeals. Its tendons row over the knuckles, small crustacean movements that remind Wendy of an overturned crab with its pale plates exposed.

She screeches, drops the arm. It thuds and rolls across the floor before righting itself and scuttling away.

—Wait! She lurches forward but suddenly crumples in pain, reaching across her shoulder to clutch her stump, which feels like it's burning. No—not burning—tearing, as if teeth of glass and metal were stripping her flesh, splintering the bone. Wendy moans, and something wet, something warm like blood and salty like the sea, seeps through the empty sleeve.

### If You're Reading This

Lulled to sleep by the lazy progress of her pink inflatable lounge chair, Iris drifts to the center of the pool. She wakes up to palm fronds waving in a cloud-stippled sky, their dark silhouettes like eyelashes in her periphery. Everywhere above her, half-dissolved contrails describe the mysterious paths of aircraft. Iris sits up. Her hair has dried into crunchy tendrils behind her ears, having been bleached blonde and dyed a blue ombré.

“Shit.” She leans forward to fish her book out of the water, the skin of her thighs squeaking against the plastic. The waterlogged volume—a debut fiction collection from some B-list celebrity she doesn’t recognize—spins out of reach, and she paddles after it with one leg, squawking. When she finally plucks the paperback out of the water, the pages have fused into thick and fleshy slabs. The book belongs to her English professor, Dr. Sana Singh, for whom she’s housesitting this weekend. Iris found it during her first spelunking of the empty house: it was on a shelf in the garage, tucked between bottles of laundry detergent and covered in a film of dust. She was attracted to the cover illustration; it reminded her of the Little Golden Books she used to read as a shy and happy child.

Perhaps hearing her cries, her boyfriend Ant lowers himself into the pool using the steps at the four-foot mark. He’s naked save for a backwards five-panel cap, and tan where his sleeves and shorts usually end. He keeps his head above water as he crawls closer, the swells rocking Iris in her chair.

“You’re burnt,” says Ant in his raspy voice, catching the arm of the chair to steady himself. “Like a little hothouse tomato.”

“I hope she wasn’t attached to this book,” says Iris, peeling back the cover.

Ant snorts. “Watch—it’s, like, some super rare signed copy.” He reaches under his cap and retrieves a small Bic lighter and a joint. He lights up, sucks daintily at one end, and hands it to Iris.

She doesn’t usually smoke, but she’s been feeling out of character. In fact, all throughout campus and the capillaries of Los Angeles, students are turning, curdling under the stress of final exams. They strip to their underwear and parade through the halls; they swallow Adderall until their eyes pop out of their sockets and dangle by their chins like joke glasses. Iris, taking her time with each drag, imagines her lungs as twin glass vases filling and swirling with smoke. “That’s not bad at all,” she croaks, and coughs against her shoulder. Already the world seems trickier.

“Dank, right? I swiped some from Nathan on my way out.”

“*Anthony*.” A pang of anxiety shoots through her at the name.

“What?” Ant closes one eye against the sun. “What’s another forty bucks on top of the million dollars he’s trying to extort from me?”

“It’s not extortion if you owe him. You did pretty much wreck his bumper.”

“That’s what bumpers are for!” He flashes his teeth, white and perfect as a picket fence, like he’s won.

“Also, stop treating this like your parents’ vacation house.” The joint sticks slightly to her wet lips. “You’re not even supposed to be here.” Iris pauses, debates the question. “Has he tried calling you?”

“Nah, my phone’s off. Once he cools down we’ll work it out. Nathan’s a pretty level-headed guy.”

Iris pours a handful of water down the front of her shins. She thinks back to the party at Ant’s and Nathan’s shared apartment and tries to string events together, but all she remembers



from last week are three-second increments—her Solo cup overflowing with foam from the keg, a girl from her honors seminar fondling her necklace—then the inside of Nathan’s bedroom, and the glow from the terrarium where his snake was swallowing mice. She remembers the door closing, muffling the party; she remembers the mouse twitching its sharpened pink tail. They undressed each other with a mindless lizardness, seemingly absent from their own bodies until they were bared to each other.

“Maybe you should go over that book with a hair dryer,” says Ant.

Iris shrugs, rolls her shoulders back. The knot of her halter-top bikini digs into the nape of her neck.

Ant wraps a hand around her calf and tugs. “Let’s go, chair hog!”

Iris allows herself to be pulled under. She wriggles to right herself. As she surfaces, she pauses with her eyes just skimming the water, unblinking into a field of drowned bugs.

The Singhs’ house in Santa Monica is sparsely furnished and smartly decorated with photographic prints. In the master bedroom, a plush white comforter enwraps the California King mattress in a way that Iris has to resist disturbing. It’s strange to think about her professor here, perhaps in a cotton pajama set, her round face smeared with a mint green pore-cleansing paste. Sana Singh wears wrap dresses in bright geometric prints, and her hair is neatly pinned to frame a forehead that crinkles during lecture, during poetic arguments about Pre-Raphaelite literature. The word *specimen* often comes to Iris in class, as in *the perfect specimen*, though of what she isn’t sure.

The photograph above the bed shows a crushed watermelon rind at the bottom of a dry riverbed. The same artist’s work is hung in the guest bedroom where she and Ant have flung

their bags. Iris stares at the image, feeling infantile and illiterate. She's embarrassed by the room that she's claimed by way of discarded underwear and body spray.

Iris steals into the bathroom and lays the book on the marble counter. She rifles through the cabinets until she finds the hair dryer. Its hollering, its heat, massages Iris into the task, and she fans out each page with a stoned diligence.

The weekend was supposed to provide some distance from Ant. She wanted to examine, in private, the contours of the protest that grew inside her as they packed their belongings, bought their graduation gowns, and planned a road trip to New York, where he is determined to live. "With or without me," said Iris when he brought it up. "It's not like that," said Ant, but his tone sounded apologetic. These days, Iris imagines losing him in the steam that rises from manhole covers, to girls in severe black trench coats. She dreams that he disappears amidst the sliding yellow bodies of wet cabs in the rain.

Ant has always been in her life: in childhood, as the gremlin who darted between adult legs whenever her mother hosted her book club; in high school, as the pimply skateboarder who filled the awkward silences in class with fart noises. Except for one kiss soaked in spiked punch in someone's backseat, they were just friends. When they were both accepted by UCLA, Iris assumed they would run in separate packs. In college, however, she had a mousiness that she thought she'd left in childhood. She clung to Ant: his fearlessness, his easy crownings of joy. She tried to resist him, too, reasoning that her mother had made that mistake already—fallen in love with the familiar. Settled for partial happiness. Her parents are still married, but just for show. With Ant, though, it hasn't been that way at all. Iris thinks of them as long distance runners, catching wind after wind and pounding forward into some ordained, euphoric future.

Her mind travels back to the party. Nathan. The thing inside her stretches, pushing at the walls of her stomach. She resolves to keep it to herself, out of mercy for everyone involved.

Something wet glances the back of her calf, and Iris yelps. “Jesus, Maggie,” she sighs, bending to ruffle the fur of the Singhs’ black Scottish terrier. “You snuck up on me.” Maggie shakes her stubby tail and huddles close to the girl’s feet.

In prying the pages apart, Iris dislodges a white notecard. She flips it over and glances at the runny blue ink, recognizing Sana Singh’s neat, capitalized font. Iris is about to tuck it back between the pages when the words “so sorry” catch her eye. It’s a note, she realizes, addressed to her husband, Priyam. She scans the card, straining to read the diluted ink:

*Dearest Pri—*

*I’ve tried being happy, but I can’t. I’m so sorry. If you’re reading this, then I’m at my parents’ house in Saratoga, and I need you gone by the time I come back.*

Iris meets her own gaze in the mirror: heavy-lidded eyes and straight, dark eyebrows. She looks misleadingly calm, unmoved by her discovery. She shuts off the hair dryer. It’s a breakup letter, she thinks, like every one she’s ever written, cousin to the gel pen notes she wrote in sixth grade, the rehearsed texts she sent in high school. She runs through it again, and the edges of the card sharpen against her palm. Maybe Sana never intended it to be discovered, or maybe it’s an artifact from a cruel time in their marriage. Or, it’s something her professor returns to again and again, whenever she brings the laundry to the garage, whenever she reaches for the spring-scented detergent and drizzles it over their intermingling clothes. Iris jams the notecard back into the book and holds it shut, as if to smother it.

They order pizza and eat it on the couch, propped up on either arm with their legs entangling on the center cushion. Iris is in one of Ant's black muscle shirts; he's pulled on a pair of jean cutoffs. Maggie scampers from room to room, throwing a rope in the air. On television, Barbara Walters shakes her blonde halo at an actress trying to squeeze her face into a wad of tissues.

The living room's high ceilings, at first so appealing to Iris, now seem eerily sentient, like a cathedral's God-eyed archways. There's intelligence in the way the house has been constructed: tall windows allowing views of the pool, and one day of children kicking balls across the lawn; large, open rooms that invite dinner parties and sunny potlucks. Iris imagines the house strewn with goodbye letters. They're snuck under potted ferns and rolled up in porcelain vases. Sewn into the lining of winter coats and taped over the instructions on bottles of household cleaner. Folded up into the size of pills, to be taken with the daily vitamins.

"I didn't love your father the day I married him," was something her mother told Iris when they shared a hotel in Tallahassee. They were visiting Iris' grandparents, who were hoarders and had filled up their guest room with dusty magazines.

"Then why did you marry him?"

Her mother swept her short hair up into a ponytail and held it with one fist. "Because he loved me. And I didn't think that anything like that would ever happen to me." She let her hair fall. "He knew it, too."

Iris was fourteen and just beginning to understand—really understand—that her mother had existed before her, and these gradual insights into her mother's life both awed and saddened her. It was like being the elder and watching her mother lose her innocence. "Don't you think that's a little unfair to Dad?" she asked.

“Why?” Her mother pulled the covers back and climbed into bed. “He got what he wanted, and it made my parents happy to see me married off. I was thirty-two, which I guess is thirty-eight nowadays, with inflation.”

“Okay,” said Iris, slowly. “Then why are you still together now?”

Her mother blinked up at her from the pillow. “Would you really like to see us split up?”

Iris picks a sausage from the greased surface of her combo pizza and pops it into her mouth. The book, irrevocably warped, lies by the delivery box on the coffee table. Its presence is menacing, daring Iris to find a place for it. She doesn’t know which is more likely—that Sana will notice the book’s water damage, or its absence from the shelf in the garage.

Unable to focus on the TV, Iris studies the side of her boyfriend’s face. She says, “Have you ever cheated on me?”

Ant reaches toward the coffee table. Skin and fat form small rolls over his waistband as he peels another slice of pizza for himself. He settles back into the faux fur throw that blankets his arm of the couch.

“Hello?”

“Huh? Did you say something?” Ant turns his pinkish eyes to her.

“Have you cheated ever? Is what I asked.”

His eyes widen just slightly. “You mean on you?”

“On whoever. But yeah, on me.”

Ant grins through a mouthful of cheese. “This is like an extremely poorly disguised trap.”

“Just answer.”

“No,” he says, knitting his eyebrows.

Iris feels her eyes go hot and soggy in their sockets. Guilt brings the blood to her cheeks. She blurts out, “I found this note that was stuck in the book. Sana wants to leave her husband. But I don’t know if she’s given it to him yet. Or if she’s ever going to, or what.”

“No way. Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it’s like, ‘If you’re reading this, it means I’m leaving you.’”

“That’s heavy. Are you crying?”

“No. Yes.” Iris smears her tears across her face with the back of her hand and takes a deep breath. “I don’t know. It’s just stressful. You’re looking for jobs in New York.”

Ant doesn’t say anything. The doorbell chimes, and they stare at each other for another second before Iris rises.

Scooting Maggie away from the door with her foot, Iris leans into the peephole. She stiffens: Nathan’s on the doorstep, tugging the cuff of his beanie. Brown hair has begun to sprout on his long chin, which is usually clean-shaven. She places both palms on the door and strains against it, as if she can shove him away, and then gently unlocks and opens the door. They haven’t spoken since the party. She pulls at the hem of her shirt, suddenly cognizant of her underwear beneath it, her bare breasts against the cotton.

“Hey,” says Nathan. He bends to offer the dog his palm to sniff.

Iris grips her elbows. “Why are you here?” She wonders how he found out where she would be this weekend, but then again, it would have been easy; they share so many people in common.

“Well, uh, two reasons.” Nathan rocks back on his heels. “One, to see you. You’ve kind of been MIA, and I wanted to apologize in person.”

She glances behind her for signs of Ant's approach. "You don't have anything to apologize for." Then, seeing the hopefulness steal across his features, she adds, "Not that it wasn't a huge mistake, but I had an equal hand in it. Look, let's just—it never happened, and it's never going to happen, okay? We fucked up. End of story."

Nathan gives a short chuckle and says, "Wow. So my feelings don't even factor in, huh?"

"Not really, no," says Iris. She takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I don't know what you thought. I had so much to drink, I hardly remember what happened."

Nathan gives a quick lift of his eyebrows and says, "Hm." It makes Iris feel heartless, but that can't be, because here her heart is, shaking in her chest and flushing her ears with blood.

She misses what they used to be, her and Ant and Nathan. When Iris first hung around the twosome in their freshman year, theirs was an easy, buoyant friendship, all flung arms and bruises from booze-fueled dares. Iris liked being with them, the cocoon of activity they spun around her. Together, they went camping at Joshua Tree and yipped gleefully through the nighttime terrain, and they sobered up together in the blinking heat of campfire embers. It wasn't until this spring that things changed. Echo Park, sitting cross-legged in the tamped grass. She and Nathan sipped diluted iced coffee and waited for her boyfriend to arrive. In leaning back, he covered her hand with his, and it stayed there long enough that she glanced over; the look on his face surprised her, the surprise like a hot needle sliding between her ribs.

"What was the second thing you came for?" prompts Iris.

Nathan's eyes alight on something over her shoulder, and his jaw clenches. "Here he comes."

"What's good, man?" says Ant as he nears the door, wiping his fingers on his shorts. "Crazy seeing you here."

“Listen,” says Nathan. “I’m done playing cat and mouse. You’re coming back to the apartment right now, and you’re gonna cut me a check.”

A smile creeps across Ant’s wide mouth. “You serious? I’ve got, like, eighty dollars to my name. I paid for that keg, remember?”

“Then we’re gonna call your parents,” says Nathan, a fist forming where his hands are jammed in the pockets of his hoodie, “and they can handle it *for* you.”

“I’m not doing shit until we set the story straight.” Ant clutches the doorknob, working the long muscles in his arm. He glances at Iris for corroboration. “You asked *me* to run to the store to re-up on liquor. I wouldn’t have touched the wheel otherwise.”

“Bullshit,” says Nathan. “I mentioned that we were low, and you sprang for the keys.”

The terrier, sensing abrasive words passing above her, begins to growl, her lower teeth a white snarl in her black snout. Nathan leans into the doorway to speak again, but Maggie interrupts with urgent barking, harsh reports that end with a whine.

“Okay, you need to go,” says Iris, herding Nathan out of the house by slowly closing the door on him. “Ant’ll get you back, I’ll make sure of it.”

“I don’t trust him,” spits Nathan. He stays the door with the toe of his sneakers and juts his chin out. “Neither of you. You’re a pair of cheats, that’s all.”

“Goodbye,” says Iris firmly. She secures the door. Her armpits are damp with sweat.

“What a dick!” says Ant, scooping Maggie into his arms. “Isn’t that right, Maggie? Straight out of Dick City.”

In her head, Iris returns to the party, to finding her deflated jeans and turning the legs inside out again. Her head pounded in time with the dull thumping of music. The shrieks of girls came to her weirdly, like rodent wailing. Nathan bounced off the bed, his hand striking the



lampshade on his nightstand, and mumbled something about Ant being out. At the time it didn't register—she was so stricken, her senses so slurred—but she realizes now that Ant, perhaps at that very moment, was swerving into a vehicle as it parallel parked.

Ant is not an overconfident drunk, and he's been cautious ever since his brother got a DUI one New Year's Eve. Iris watches Maggie's tongue flick over her boyfriend's face, stunned by the idea that maybe Nathan pressed the keys on him to get him out of the apartment.

Her thoughts vanish, however, as something surges through the window and shatters the glass. The sound, crisp and violent, makes Iris scream, and she covers her head as bits of glass pelt her body. When it's over, Maggie is howling and Ant is helping her to her feet. He's holding the sides of her face and saying her name.

"Yeah, I'm okay, I'm okay," she says.

"Don't move. I'm going to find a broom. That son of a bitch!"

Ant leaps clear of the glass on the floor, picking a safe path towards the garage. Iris sees his shape reflected in each shard. She spots the dirt-caked garden gnome that has rolled to the other side of the living room, its complacent smile now facing the wall, and cups a hand over her mouth.

To calm Maggie down, they bring her to the trails that run along the sea cliffs. Her elongated shadow floats on the edge of the paved walkway. To their left, a wooden fence divides hikers from hills textured with succulents, their bulbous petals tipped red, or blanched white by the coastal sun. A salt-tinged breeze brings goosebumps to Iris's skin.

“Yeah, I don’t know what’s happening with Nathan. That’s gotta be a low point, though,” says Ant, gesturing with the handle of Maggie’s retractable leash. “Imagine if that had hit you? In the head?”

Iris takes his free hand. She feels weakened by a slippery panic, uncertain if Nathan assumed something would come of their sleeping together, disturbed by the idea that he manufactured the opportunity. Here, in the golden lawn of the oceanside and the dark waves creeping below, it seems easy to pretend it didn’t happen. To feel distinct from any past or future action.

“You okay?” Ant studies her face. “Flying gnome scare you senseless?”

“No,” says Iris, giving his hand a squeeze, “I’m just thinking, you know, maybe it would be easier to pay him and be done with it. You’re both moving out in a couple weeks, anyway. Kinda wash your hands clean, you know?”

“Whoa, whoa, whose side are you *on*?” says Ant with exaggerated disbelief. Then after a while, he shrugs, taps the bill of his cap. “I guess I’m waiting on that last paycheck to come through. What’d he mean, though, ‘You’re a pair of cheats’?”

Here it is, Iris thinks. Her opportunity for truth and cleanliness. “Ant,” she says lowly.

“Yeah.”

She struggles for words as if for air, the silence that ticks by building pressure in her chest. Maggie’s name tag tinkles as she trots along. It would be nice to be a dog, woofing and puffing through life with impunity. Iris glances upwards at the houses that crest the hill. Their windows are filled with light, their balconies outfitted with American flags and furniture of pebbled glass. It reminds her of a game she and Ant used to play. Just before falling asleep, Ant

would mutter humbly in her ear, “In our house, we’ll have a working fireplace. And we’re not allowed to use Duraflame logs.”

And she would shift her head on his chest to displace sleep. “Okay,” she said. “In our house, we’ll have potted plants on the fire escape.”

“What kind of house has a fire escape?”

“Our house is a rent-controlled apartment in San Francisco.”

“That’s no fun. New York.” Even back then, that’s where he wanted to move. Both his parents had gone after college and spoke of that era with a rakish enthusiasm.

“We’ll see,” she would say.

Iris takes a deep breath and swings their hands into the air. She points to the houses and says, “In our house, we’ll have a wall that’s just a big window.” And she laughs out of relief, out of gratefulness that she doesn’t have to tell Ant the one thing that would break him, that she’s elected to be perfect in love from this moment forward. Suddenly, moving east seems like no hurdle at all; she was a coward before. She feels fizzy and light, like her body is evaporating.

“What a throwback,” says Ant. “I forgot all about that game.”

The next morning is Monday, and the Singhs come home earlier than expected.

Ant has found a cardboard box in the recycling bin and is flattening it against the window when the car pulls into the driveway. Iris, ripping a length of duct tape from the roll, sees it through a flap in the cardboard.

“Shit,” she says. “They’re back already.”

Ant groans. “Come *on*.”

Vague shapes move behind the windshield, and then Sana emerges from the passenger side. She's saying something, digging in the patent leather tote that hangs from her shoulder. Her husband steps out of the car, shuts the door, leans over the car roof and makes her laugh. Iris examines Sana's face, her large features shining. It's impossible to divine any kind of unhappiness. Quickly, Iris flips through the catalogue of husbands and wives she knows. Hardly any of them seem safe.

Iris remembers the book with a shock. She shoves the duct tape at Ant—"Hold this"—and dashes into the family room. It's still on the coffee table, which oddly surprises her. She rifles through the pages until she finds the note again. The dried ink is even weaker than before, its message bleeding across the card. Iris doubts that she would have been able to decipher it now, this dissolved missile. She pictures her professor's pen moving across the paper, the ink connecting to form its terrible runes, Sana's features grotesque with the pain and fear of writing them, and shudders at the precariousness of it all. Iris slips the card back inside the paperback, runs a finger over the raised lettering. Here it is: the innocuous object. As the key turns in the front door and Maggie skitters to greet her owners, Iris stands with the book in her hand, learning the dimensions of adult perseverance.

## McKenna the King

Midnight fog crawls through the Berkeley hills, rearranging branches on the bay trees as it thickens and wanes. A deer canters across Ridge Road with her thin legs spearing the gloom and pauses at the raised garden bed in front of the Castle's iron gate. The air throbs with a muffled bass line. She flicks an ear as large as an open palm and lowers her muzzle to the pea sprouts fanned over the moist soil. Just then, a window scrapes open on the yellow stucco façade, uncorking a stream of music and laughter that startles the deer and sends her bounding away. A hand adorned with silver bangles and rings protrudes to air the bright ember of a cigarette.

Situated just north of the Berkeley campus, the Castle houses 126 university students; a number of unofficial residents approved by a democratic house vote, called "fish"; and a cast of drifters, Burners picked up from Black Rock City or crust punks lured in from Telegraph Avenue, who sometimes stay and become "fixies." All residents are "kings." The concrete structure rises four stories with two floors of common space connecting the east and west wings, where men and women roomed separately when the cooperative opened in 1966.

Tonight, a cross-section of the house reveals the migration of bodies up and down its stairwells, in and out of rooms. It's the last Friday before dead week—the uninterrupted stretch before final exams—and occasion for an impromptu party. A couple slumps against each other at the bathroom sink, mouths connecting erratically, deaf to the gag and cough of someone in the stalls. In the adjacent room, a club of girls kneeling around a coffee table takes turns lowering their faces to the glass surface, inhaling sharply, fluttering the rime of glitter on their eyelids.

In the common room, the heart of the party hops and thrashes. Tracked dirt and spilled drink smears over the black-and-white tiles, and an LED disco ball throws coins of colored light over the wall murals. Kings trample over cardboard signs that say *We're afraid for Virginia*

*Woolf* and *Hella Occupy*. Divided by French doors, the common room opens to a long balcony furnished with mismatched sofas, where kids squeeze onto the tattered upholstery and graffitied leather, kicking aside beer bottles for a footrest on the coffee tables, climbing over laps.

Here stands McKenna, elbows propped on the metal railing. She observes the hot tub in the central courtyard below. Slick flesh flashes out of the dark water as arms are slung around shoulders. A sophomore in film studies, McKenna is a fish; she stays with a fifth-year senior named Brendan in the largest single-occupancy room in the Castle, secured by his tenure in the Berkeley Student Cooperative. He sidles up to her now and does a small push-up against the bannister.

“There you are.” His grin seems to be melting off his face, drooping towards his chin. His brown eyes are dilated black. They swallowed a pill each before coming downstairs. “Where’ve you been, Mickey?”

“Here, this whole time. Literally in the same room as you,” says McKenna. She’s been observing his movements through the common room, afraid each time he leaves that he’s gone to someone. To Baby Shirley, perhaps, the only freshman in the house. Her older brothers were kings, too; now they’re sailing in Costa Rica.

Brendan encircles McKenna with an arm and squeezes her bicep, kneading it and hurting her a little. It reminds her of the bruise on her shoulder, gotten during her Maintenance Crew workshift, and she reaches to test the pulpy flesh. Pain radiates pleasantly from the sore and wilts her body into Brendan’s chest. She closes her eyes; her brain carbonates. When she rises a minute later, the air feels as thick and tangible as bathwater, and the tip of every cigarette leaves red contrails in her vision.

“Oh,” says Brendan. “Nice to have you join the party.”

“Where’d you get this stuff?”

“One of the grad students in my lab.”

“I feel headless. I feel like my body absorbed my head.”

“Right on.”

“No, it’s really weird,” she says, sucking in air so hard that her teeth chatter. The expanding tissue of her lungs massages her chest.

Brendan steps behind her, enfolds her in his arms, and squeezes. Their bodies contract as a single muscle. McKenna, despite herself, feels a rush of tenderness like bleeding.

“This is nice. I like this,” she says. Her lips move against the forearms wrapped around her.

“What you said the other night—”

“No,” she cuts in. “Not now.”

She had waited as long as she could, but she brought it up during a study break on the roof: what they “were.” She resents her own predictability, her inability to keep things casual. All the signs are there. She prepares two cups of coffee when she wakes. The phrase “my roommate” has a tinny falseness when she calls her parents. On the nights he spends elsewhere, she climbs down from their lofted bed and sleeps on the twin mattress she dragged in when she first moved into the Castle.

“You’re right,” he says. “Not now.” He massages her neck, circling each knob of bone that protrudes from her spine, digging into the base of her skull. A helicopter rumbles over the Berkeley campus, and her eyes jiggle in their sockets as she tries to trace its path.

“Come on,” she says. “Let’s get in there.”

They push past a cluster of kings with sweat-matted hair. Deep house blooms from the DJ booth as if they've surfaced from a long dive. The pores on McKenna's skin oblige like ears as they slither through the common room, where the bodies have multiplied, are multiplying still. There are torsos writhing from the flesh of other torsos, and legs branching from other legs. A magnificent calf kicks vertically into the air.

Brendan builds a perimeter around her, his hands sweaty and multifarious, now caressing a hip, now plucking a drink from the crowd and running ice along her lips. His cotton shirt dampens and clings to his body, which seems incapable of stillness. Now he peels wet hair from the side of her neck, and now he pulls taut her left earlobe, each time with his touch reminding her where she is real.

Growing up in Palm Springs, staring at the San Bernardino Mountains until they looked as flat as movie façades, McKenna wanted to stretch her palms out, push them over.

Her mother was a wedding photographer. Sometimes she recruited McKenna to hold the reflector or keep the bride's dress from catching on the desert scrub, framing it as a bonding experience but invariably too busy to say anything other than "Up, McKenna! Use those muscles." Her father was a real estate agent whose greatest success was selling a \$2.3 million home with mountaintop views to Uma Thurman's half sister, introduced by a family friend, in 2001. They lived comfortably, amicably. McKenna did her homework and waited for life to begin.

When she chose Berkeley, she envisioned thrills and upheavals, but her first year defied those expectations. Her floormates kept their doors shut and slunk separately to dinner—all except for a triad of girls who visited Frat Row every weekend and came back on Sundays



wearing fraternity hoodies that brushed their knees. By the end of the year, they'd collected letters from half the Alphas, Sigma Nu, Phi Delt, and two from Delta Chi. Still, McKenna said yes when they asked her to be the fourth roommate next fall. "We found this house, it's super cute. You'll get, like, the smallest room, but it's also the cheapest."

McKenna was headed to this apartment when she answered the Craigslist ad for a ride out of Palm Springs. The next day, Brendan arrived in a white muscle tee and a tropical-print bucket hat. Under it, his brown hair was slicked back and curled behind his ears.

He sprang from the car as she approached and took her suitcase. "Sorry I'm late," he said, fitting it into the trunk. "Made a bagel run." He had a lopsided smile, drowsy eyes.

"That's okay. You, um, got something here," she said, pointing to her incisor.

"Where?" He probed the crevice with his tongue, lifted his lip in a snarl. "Did I get it?"

"Yeah, you got it."

"Think it was a poppy seed." He ducked through the door and swept her side clean of CDs and crumpled napkins. "All set!"

In the car, *you can't start a fire, you can't start a fire without a spark* floated out of the speakers, and McKenna kicked her sandals to clear a space for her feet. Brendan threw repeated glances in her direction. She straightened the straps of her blue sundress and raked through her dense, frizzy curls.

"You look familiar," he said. "You weren't run over by a skateboard in front of Wheeler last semester, were you?"

"Uh—" said McKenna, stalling. She remembered it clearly. She'd been reading en route to class, the pamphlet held low as she traversed campus, when another body slammed her into

the ground. Her skull had struck concrete; her calves had oozed blood as if through a sieve. “I was, unfortunately.”

“It was one of those—*sss*,” he demonstrated, sucking air between his teeth. He caught her reflection in the dust-specked windshield and laughed, gently. “It’s okay, I only remember because I thought you were cute.”

She rubbed a fingertip against the glove box.

“You going up for summer session?”

“No, my lease is starting. I’m moving in with these girls on Southside.”

“Right on.”

She shrugged. “We’ll see how it goes.”

“I wouldn’t mind Southside. You got Amoeba, the theater. Big-ass pizza slices.”

“It’s my roommates.” She had tried to rationalize, tried to reassure herself that she would barely be home between classes and studying and her job in the anthropology department, but somehow it was different telling a stranger. “I don’t know if I’m going to make it out alive. Or if any of *them* will.”

“All right, so ditch ‘em.”

“That was the onramp,” she said, tapping a knuckle against the window.

“Dammit. Every time!”

“I can’t,” she said, bracing herself against the U-turn. “I desperately need a place to live that’s not the Unit Three dorms.”

The tips of palm fronds flitted over the freeway barrier, then quickened to a green haze as they merged with traffic. McKenna picked at her door lock. She was afraid, if she lived alone,

that she would disappear altogether. Cutting across Memorial Glade, she had wondered at the students clustered on the grass—how had they found each other?

“Well, I gotta ask,” said Brendan. “You know about the co-ops?”

“I *do* know about the co-ops.”

“And?”

“Aren’t they kind of nuts?”

“Yeah, well—every house is different.” He flipped the visor down. “Myself, I’ve been in the Castle for three years. I’ve seen the best and worst of that house. You get that many people together, it’s bound to get crazy, but out of that experiment comes some pretty incredible things.”

“I just don’t know if it’s my scene.”

“My thing is, if I want to build something, five other kids are going to help me do it. I want to tear something down, same thing. Certain purchases, the house passes money for it. As long as it comes from a good place, it gets done. Suddenly, in this community, you have all this presence and power. I don’t know you, like, at all,” he said, sliding his hands to meet at the bottom of the steering wheel, “but it might be your scene.”

Brendan is gone when McKenna wakes on her sunlit pillow. She stretches, running a palm across his side of the bed and finding the band of her discarded underwear. She scoops it up and launches it across the room, where it falls on the lip of the mesh hamper.

The hamper is three-quarters full, its crusty layers regularly scavenged for acceptable pants to wear, and sits beside a green leather loveseat inherited from a previous occupant. Aside from the lofted bedframe, the rest of the furniture is provided by the BSC: a solid wood writing desk, a tall dresser, a wardrobe. The room is forest green save for a gold accent wall over which

someone has stenciled the first two lines of “Howl,” and a swatch of red on the ceiling.

McKenna has dragged a dingy Oriental rug from the basement free pile, tacked a few photos to the wall. A string of white bulbs frames the window overlooking the neighbor’s backyard.

She scoots across the mattress to shuck this window open. From here she can see clear across the bay, light roiling the surface as if it were thick with sardines, to the blue buildings of San Francisco. The morning breeze is cool and smells faintly of pine. She’s almost asleep again when Brendan comes through the door with two plates.

“I made breakfast burritos. Am I the best,” he says, placing one on her lap, “or am I the best?”

McKenna hoists herself up. “I don’t know. You’ve rendered me speechless with joy.” She bites through the warm tortilla and leans her head against the wall, chewing a mouthful of eggs, beans, and chorizo. The pulp and spice of tomato salsa feel good in her stale morning mouth.

“Burritos are nature’s hangover cure,” says Brendan, stepping from chair to desk to mattress. He sits cross-legged, facing her.

She swallows, reaches for the water bottle on the dresser top. “You’re too good to me.”

Brendan is quiet. His hair is greasy and parted messily. His face, long and smooth, reminds her of a river rock; she wants to weigh it in the palm of her hand, run her thumb over its polished contours.

She nudges him, her foot rising under the covers. “You wanna go for a hike in Tilden today? It’s so nice out.”

He sucks down another mouthful, picks a pinto bean off the plate. “Yeah, sounds cool. Although—” He wipes his fingers on his basketball shorts “—I don’t know, don’t you think we should do our own thing for a while?”

She bites down on the rubber hose of the water bottle, pausing before she takes a drink. “You’re right. We’re having fun. We shouldn’t have too much of a good thing.”

“It’s like what you said. It gets confusing.”

“Maybe Baby Shirley can clear your head.”

“Come on.”

“Come on, what?”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with her. I’m just laying my cards out.” He shakes droplets of juice from the end of his burrito. “I’ve told you, I’m not trying to date any one person. Doesn’t mean I don’t care about you.”

She scratches behind her ear with a pinky, parting a bushy halo of hair. She wants to put on underwear, but she’s afraid to flip back the covers and expose her nipples, her stomach and its pale hairs.

“Maybe it’s my fault,” he continues. “Maybe it was dumb to think I could let you fish and not get involved. You’re smart, funny, pretty—it’s just asking for trouble.”

“Well, I’m sorry you had to get *involved*.” She lets her hands fall, palms up, on either side of her lap.

He rubs her leg through the blankets. “I think you’re great. I don’t regret anything.”

“So what are you saying? That was the last time?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I don’t want anyone getting hurt.”

“Because this is painless.”

“Of course not. I don’t *want* to do this.”

She feels young, duped. Her burrito is beginning to unravel.

“Hey. I’m still here for you. I still, like, want to hear about your day and go ‘round town with you.”

“Yeah, it’ll be like nothing’s changed,” she spits.

“And, by next semester you’ll be off the waiting list and have a contract with the BSC. We’ll be in different rooms, and who knows? Maybe things will be clearer between us by then.” He grabs hold of her ankles and leans forward to meet her eyes, but she’s staring at the rug, tracing the dull arabesque. He shakes her foot.

After a while, he slides off the bed. “Eat your food,” he says. “It’ll help with your head.”

The next night, during Sunday council, house election speeches are held. They will happen in ascending order: BSC board representatives, then the waste reduction, garden, network, maintenance, social, workshift, food, kitchen, and house managers. Manager duties fulfill the five hours of workshift members owe the BSC each week, and in some cases they pay for room and board.

Kings swarm the common room as dinnertime approaches. They scour the cupboards for plates and glasses, dunk their arms into soapy dish bins for a fork to rinse clean. McKenna, slow to forage, manages an orange Frisbee and two knives held like chopsticks. She climbs onto a table, the surface decoupaged with Archie comics, and rests her head on Bev’s shoulder. Bev is the current house manager. A Filipina, she wears her long black hair shaved on one side, accentuating the two silver hoops that pierce the cartilage of her ear.

“Hey, doll,” she says, cradling McKenna’s head. “You doing okay?”

McKenna slept in Bev's room last night to avoid other options—sharing a bed with Brendan, curling up on her own.

“Does general malaise and a renewed dissatisfaction with life count as okay?”

“I'll allow it.”

The Sunday night cook crew ferries pans from the industrial-sized kitchen into the common room. They wheel out lentil salad in a stainless steel serving bowl, large enough for a person to climb in, which kings often do, gripping the sides as they're spun around and around. There are kale chips, butternut squash soup, garlic-rosemary chicken and tofu, quinoa, and vegan zucchini brownies. The cooks announce each item as they set it down and raise their burnt mitts in the air. Kings pile two deep around each tray, reaching over each other to scrape a portion onto their plates before jostling towards the next station.

“Remember to serve someone before yourself!” yells the head chef as he lugs out the stockpot, bangs matted under his backwards Cal cap. A tall redhead named Charlie leaps onto a tabletop and ladles soup into outstretched yogurt cups, mugs, mason jars.

Finally, when everyone is seated, Bev hits the gong hanging from the exposed pipes on the ceiling. “Welcome to council!” she yells over the reverberations. “We have a lot to get through tonight, so let's get started! Board reps, you're up first.”

McKenna takes a seat at Bev's table. As she tucks her skirt under her, she scans the room until she sees Brendan. He laughs at something and cracks open a tall can of PBR, clinks it against his friend's.

Four candidates weave to the front of the room. A girl begins to speak, both hands tucked into the pockets of her high-waisted shorts: “I'd love to represent the Castle's diverse wants and

needs at the central level.” The others unfold sheets of paper and look over their notes, swinging nervously from side to side.

“I’ve boarded here for one semester and lived here for one,” she continues.

“Drink!” someone commands. It’s the council drinking game: take a sip when someone mentions how long he or she has lived in the Castle, when someone takes off a shirt, when someone says the house motto, “Long live the king.”

McKenna slides quinoa onto the flat of her knife. She’s usually invested in house affairs: she’s taken turns at beekeeping, facilitating the women’s support group, attending talks on food politics. Tonight, she wants to retreat, but she stays because Baby Shirley is running for social manager.

An hour later, Baby Shirley steps forward. Though petite, Baby Shirley is full figured, her jeans pulled tight over wide hips, a silk camisole clinging to her cleavage. She ruffles the back of her pixie cut as the whoops subside.

“Thanks, guys,” she says with a bounce of her shoulders. Her voice is thin and sugared, her dark brows lofted high. “I just want to say, you guys are the smartest, sexiest, most outrageous group of people I’ve ever met, and that’s why I love living in the Castle.” Fingers snap around the room. “At the same time, being here, I see how it’s easy to feel lost in the crowd. Which is why, if I’m social manager, my priority will be to make events not only fun, but inclusive. As someone who’s been super active in social crew and has experience with everything from booking performers to working security, I’m ready to step up. And from talking with a bunch of you, I already have some great ideas.”

“Like what?” someone calls out.



“Like, I was thinking how cool it would be to rent a bunch of sumo suits and have a huge wrestling championship,” says Baby Shirley, ticking off her fingers. “A zombie-themed rave. For Easter, we’ll hide eggs around the house with, um, special treats inside.”

McKenna exchanges glances with Bev, who is twisting her mood ring, turning the color from *content* to *worried*.

Charlie the redhead raises his hand. He leans back on the table bench so as not to shout in his neighbor’s ear and booms, “This question is for everyone. Given the incident with Leandra Watts, the Castle is on pretty thin ice with the rest of the BSC. From what I hear, we risk becoming too big of liability and being shut down for quote-unquote renovations. You guys remember what they did to Irving Hall. Do you have any plans to address this, or programs you hope to implement to keep our members safe?” He leans forward again, the keys on his carabiner jingling in time with the cascade of snaps around the common room.

Leandra Watts, an aspiring folk singer and former king, took a medley of drugs during the Castle’s annual Renaissance Faire in 2010. The event, which begins with an elaborate eight-course meal, draws hundreds of Berkeley students for the after-party. In the fevered celebration, no one found Leandra in her room, still wearing her flower crown and costume of green velvet, until she was already a pallid blue. She remains comatose in her childhood bed in San Diego, under the care of her mother. Mrs. Watts’ two-year litigation against the Castle ended recently in a \$1.5 million out-of-court settlement paid by the BSC’s insurer.

“Point of information,” says Bev, rising and placing one knee on the bench. “Because of the settlement, the BSC is at risk of unsustainably high insurance premiums or being denied coverage outright. We have a rep for being a hard-partying house, but we need to stay in central level’s good graces—I’m glad you brought up the issue, Charlie.”

Another candidate named George, an international student from Bristol, clears his throat. “Yeah, actually, I’ve given the matter a lot of thought,” he says, tugging at his gray beanie. “I’d love to hear input, but initially I’d like to improve on our harm reduction workshops, and refocus events on the substance-free side.”

Craning her neck, McKenna says, “What about the obvious conflict of interest between being a social manager and being a known distributor?”

Heads whip from her to Baby Shirley, whose color deepens at the question. She directs a close-lipped smile at McKenna. “I could see how it’d be problematic, but I’m sure anyone here could separate their house position from what they do on their own time.”

“You say ‘anyone here,’ but you’re the only prospective manager who sells,” McKenna persists. She glances at Brendan, who is picking at the tab of his beer. She goes on, the words giving her a cold thrill. “When you’re the organizer, you’re never on your own time. Personally, I wouldn’t trust you to have the house’s best interests at heart.”

In the second it takes her to recover, Baby Shirley plucks at her camisole. Then she delivers coolly, “I understand and respect your concern, but if you remember my brothers, who ran social together in fall 2009, you’ll know that there’s a precedent for keeping personal affairs and responsibilities separate.” She poses, chin tucked into shoulder. “That’s all my time, but I’m happy to take more questions in private. Long live the king!”

“Drink!” choruses the room.

Brendan catches her in the stairwell after council.

“I don’t know if putting Baby on blast was the best way to discredit her,” he laughs, bounding up two steps to be level with McKenna. Kings divide paths on the landing, heading up

to the rooftop study, going down to the basement rec room. The concrete stairwell echoes with their footsteps and shouts.

“She’s really got you brainwashed.”

“No, I think it’s a legitimate concern—you just put it out there in an antagonistic way.”

“It was the elephant in the room. Anyone would be more qualified. I know George doesn’t work party security in corsets and fishnets like Baby Shirley, but you know he’d do a better job.”

Brendan bobs his head in a placating way. “George is a solid candidate, yeah. Hey, you going to be in the room tonight?”

“Why, do you need it? Just put a hairband on the door.”

He surrenders with his hands. “Whoa. I’m just trying to be nice. I miss you.”

McKenna turns at the hall entrance. “I just want to get through the rest of this semester without your bullshit. That means no ‘I miss you,’ no ‘I want to spend time with you.’”

“So it has to be all or nothing?”

“Well, you give me so little, I’d rather have nothing.”

He glances at the mural behind her, an undulating Dr. Seuss landscape. “Maybe that’s your problem. It’s all so black and white with you.”

“No, don’t make me that person. I don’t have a problem.” She leans in, her voice taut. “You think you’re so easygoing? You’re in deep with Baby Shirley, and it’s obvious to everyone but you. You’re constantly on call as her personal chauffeur, you’re doing her workshifts—she should’ve mentioned *that* in her speech, maybe, the fact that you’re in there on Friday afternoons, blowing up balloons like her pet monkey.”

Brendan tilts his head back, but his face betrays nothing.

A door opens in the hall. "Get a room!"

McKenna walks away wearing her regret like a cloak. She imagines him following, his footsteps quiet on the carpet. She imagines leading him to the room, turning around, being close enough to see the pulse and flutter of blood in his neck, close enough to apologize. But she enters the room alone, and later, when she shoves the window open, she can hear his and Baby Shirley's voices floating up from the courtyard, and the splash of water, and the nauseating pauses in between.

She wakes with a full bladder in the middle of the night. Her eyes feel stiff and unable. Brendan's half of the bed lies in a cold swamp of moonlight. From campus, the gothic tolls of the campanile sound once, twice. Reluctantly, she swings her legs out of bed and drops to the floor, toes curling against the cold concrete. She picks up a cardigan that was flung over the sofa arm and crosses to the bathroom. In the stall, leaning over her knees, feet hovering above damp squares of toilet paper and cardboard rolls, McKenna decides that she was wrong: she does not want nothing.

She paces down the hallway, descends the stairwell to the courtyard. Goose bumps stipple her legs as she approaches the hot tub, where two figures sway in the water. "Hey," she croaks. The air is fragrant with mulch from the garden beds.

"McKenna? That you?" Brendan bleats.

Empty cans and a plastic handle of whiskey line the edge of the tub. Brendan, twisting to catch sight of McKenna, knocks something over with his elbow and sends aluminum rattling across the courtyard. He's slack-jawed, supporting Baby Shirley against him. She appears to be

sleeping. “Help me get ‘er outta here,” he says. A cigarette butt drifts along the perimeter of the tub.

“Jesus Christ,” says McKenna.

“Come on,” says Brendan cajolingly. He begins to stand, taking Baby Shirley under the armpits. “Up up. Time for bed.”

Sighing, McKenna reaches for the girl’s legs. She digs her fingers into the slippery flesh and tugs on the weight, bringing first one calf, then the other, over the cushioned edge, so that Baby Shirley is sitting upright. Baby Shirley moans in protest.

“Can you stand?” asks McKenna.

Baby Shirley croaks and vomits an acrid stream of liquid between her feet.

“Oh, no,” says Brendan, wobbling where he stands.

McKenna, dancing out of the trajectory, reaches up to rub Baby Shirley’s back. When the girl is done heaving, she scoops water from the tub to splash against her lips and chin. Baby Shirley sniffs and slaps her thighs with incoherent hands. Then a look of lucidity passes over her face. She seems to recognize McKenna for the first time, and she hides her eyes, and sobs.

Subject: *Welcome to the Berkeley Student Cooperative*

*Congratulations!*

*Your housing request has been approved. The BSC would like to offer you residency at Castle Co-op for the upcoming semester. To accept, defer, or petition for a different placement, please fill out the attached form and return it to Central Office by December 21<sup>st</sup>.*

*Best regards,  
Grace Channing  
BSC Executive Director*

At first, McKenna does nothing. She toggles back to her final term paper for History of Film and reads over the opening paragraphs. She replaces “unique” with “inimitable.” Reaching into a bowl of pomegranate seeds, she glances over the laptop screen. It’s a quiet afternoon in the common room. At an adjacent table, kings huddle around a Scrabble board, light curling around each bent head in a contemplative nimbus. A breeze from the balcony lifts McKenna’s class notes. In the kitchen, the cooks are singing along to the Backstreet Boys.

Baby Shirley appears with a mesh laundry bag slung over her shoulder. McKenna waves her over. “Pomegranate?” she offers.

“No, thanks.” Without makeup, Baby Shirley looks younger and older at the same time. Her features are diminished, primordial.

“Guess what I just got.” McKenna angles her laptop and clicks the email.

“Nice.”

“Listen, I’m sorry about calling you out like that during council.”

“It’s whatever. I’m not mad.” Her fingers whiten around the drawstrings of her laundry bag. “And, like, you had a point. Obviously, I tend to get into trouble.” A faint smile turns her face impish, a smile that McKenna doesn’t like.

“Anyway, since I have a contract, I think I’ll try running for social. I’m about to send out my spiel on the Listserv. Just so you know.”

Baby Shirley forces a smile. “Yeah, why not go for it?”

“Right?” McKenna reciprocates the grimace and turns back to her paper.

Two seconds pass, and Baby Shirley shifts the bag over her shoulder. “O-kay,” she says, and turns, her flip-flops slapping the tile floor as she exits.

McKenna, sucking on a juice-stained finger, begins to fill out her paperwork.

# **Jenny (Yi) Xie**

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## **EDUCATION**

**Johns Hopkins University**  
**M.F.A. in Creative Writing, Fiction**

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**August 2013 – May 2015**

**University of California, Berkeley**  
**B.A. in English, Creative Writing**  
Cumulative GPA: 3.885 | English GPA: 3.933  
Highest Honors, High Distinction in General Scholarship

**Berkeley, CA**  
**August 2008 – May 2012**

- Honors thesis: “Framing the Traumatic Lacuna: Evolutions of Community, Artifact, and Countermonumentalism in the Novels of Jonathan Safran Foer”
- Regents’ and Chancellor’s Scholars Association

## **EXPERIENCE**

**Johns Hopkins University**  
**Instructor**

**Baltimore, MD**  
**August 2012 – Present**

- Taught Introduction to Fiction and Poetry I, a prerequisite course for the Writing Seminars major at the university

**Soldsie, Inc.**  
**Content Strategist**

**San Francisco, CA**  
**August 2012 – Present**

- Crafted engaging, SEO-driven content for the blog and secured contributing positions in the small business and social media blogosphere
- Wrote copy for email newsletters, transactional campaigns, print and digital onboarding materials, and case studies of top Soldsie sellers
- Engaged online communities through Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ using metrics and Crowdbooster to optimize content and schedule posts
- Prepared press releases and bylined articles for the start-up’s rebranding launch

**InternMatch, Inc.**  
**Content Marketing Intern**

**San Francisco, CA**  
**September 2012 – April 2013**

- Wrote posts for the company blog with a focus on achieving SEO goals, thought leadership in the student employment sector, and rapport with other industry bloggers
- Drove students to apply through targeted email and newsletter campaigns, optimizing for click-through and conversion rates
- Built new landing pages for the website and created more employer resources, using creative copy and strategic keyword use to secure high rankings on Google
- Led customer support efforts through Desk.com

**Berkeley Student Cooperative**  
**Recruitment Coordinator**

**Berkeley, CA**  
**January 2011 – May 2012**

- Forged an aggressive marketing plan that succeeded in expanding housing for Summer 2012
- Organized community outreach events such as House Tours and Dinners, Cal Day presentations, and themed housing information sessions, reaching thousands of prospective members
- Designed and wrote communications materials for both print and online campaigns

- Collaborated with the External Affairs Committee, liaised with university and local cooperative partners, and coordinated volunteer efforts for special events

**Berkeley Student Cooperative**

**Berkeley, CA**

***Administrative Assistant***

**January 2011 – May 2011**

- Took minutes at meetings for the External Affairs Committee and the Capital Affairs Committee
- Prepared meeting summaries and delegated tasks assigned by the Vice President

**University of California Student Learning Center**

**Berkeley, CA**

***Writing Tutor and Workshop Leader***

**February 2010 – May 2012**

- Personalized the writing process for students during one-on-one tutoring sessions
- Facilitated a Summer Bridge writing workshop for incoming freshmen that acclimated them to university-level inquiry of texts
- Led workshops in support of English courses ranging from Reading and Comprehension to surveys of modern literature
- Invited Bay Area writers and performers to speak for Other Voices, a class celebrating diverse, innovative, and emerging voices, and developed a discussion curriculum to complement lectures

**Alphonse Berber Gallery**

**Berkeley, CA**

***Projects Management Intern***

**September 2009 – August 2010**

- Managed the community through responding to artist submissions, publicizing events in local event listings, updating the gallery website, and copyediting exhibition catalogues
- Oversaw exhibition installations and supported opening night logistics
- Supported the launch of the Marina Abramović Institute as art academy and public performance art resource and archive in San Francisco, CA
- Curated a showcase of photographer Sean DuFrene's work at the local Beta Lounge

## **PUBLICATIONS AND HONORS**

### **Fiction**

- "Stop," *Palaver*, 2008
- "Hitcher," *The Monarch Review*, 2011
- "The Pacific," *Literary Laundry*, 2011
- Julia Keith Shrout Short Story Prize, UC Berkeley, 2011
- "Carry-On," *Riddle Fence*, 2012
- Elizabeth Mills Crothers Prize in Literary Composition, UC Berkeley, 2012
- "Love Battles," *Bound Off*, 2014
- "Atlas at the Starlite Inn," *Front Porch Journal*, 2014
- "The Director," *Ninth Letter Online*, 2014
- "If You're Reading This," *Devil's Lake*, 2014 Driftless Prize in Fiction
- "Bone Meal," *Narrative*, 2014 Narrative 30 Below Story Contest finalist
- "Wendy Beside Herself," *PANK*, 2015

### **Non-fiction**

- "For Hire," *Thought Catalog*, 2011
- "A Children's Book," *The New Library*, 2012
- *Godzilla Says Hi*, zine, 2004-2008



**Poetry**

- “Domesticity,” *The Furnace Review*, 2005
- “What Is,” *Falling Hard* ed. Betsy Franco, Candlewick Press, 2008
- “On Being Brave,” *Berkeley Poetry Review*, 2010
- Joan Lee Yang Poetry Prize, UC Berkeley, 2011
- Samuel C. Irving Prize for American Wit and Humor, UC Berkeley, 2012

**ACTIVITIES**

Hey You, Come Back!: A Reading Series, Program Coordinator, February 2014 – Present

The Tudor and Stuart Reading Series, Program Coordinator, August 2014 – January 2015